VIRGINITY

by

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THE theme of virginity is allied to whatever is deepest in the human heart, and it lies also at the centre of the Catholic Church. To write about it is like making a joyous inventory of what is, in our own day as well as in the first centuries of Christianity, one of the richest treasure hoards of Christian virtue.[1]

A full treatment of it demands reinforcement from contemporary research into the depths of the human soul, hungering for love and created for infinity. Recent physiological and psychological investigations have striven to throw light on the life of instinct and its proper role, and the new questions asked in this field have brought fresh enlightenment. The study of non-Christian mysticism, especially in India, has a further contribution to make, for, either by likeness or by contrast, it brings out the nature of Christian celibacy at a time when society, hyper-sexualized, piles up antagonistic criticism of the Gospel demands and promises. These three different streams of thought all meet in this study.

I have given a great deal of my space to quotations from the distant Christian writers. I should have liked to give even more, for the Fathers' writings are family possessions, heirlooms of wisdom handed down by the

[1] *Enchiridion Asceticum* by Rouet de Journel and Dutilleul S.J. (Herder) has acted as a guide for much patristic research. The French translation, which I have not used because I did not know it existed at that time, will provide an efficient means of making the best texts of the Fathers of the Church available to a large body of readers.

Church.[1] Twentieth Century Christians should soak themselves in these sources. There, already, they will find difficulties they are tempted to think insoluble overcome by utter fidelity to God's Word. There, too, is found the modern desire for the essence of spirituality without elaboration, but rewarded by a harmony between the sense of the concrete and a spacious presentation of views of the Faith.

Apart from explicit quotations, I have tried to reiterate the Church's traditional teaching of which Pius XII recently reminded us. 'The Church, the Bride of Christ, has actively borne witness more than once to the esteem and maternal love in which she holds consecrated virgins.' 'I am not expressing personal opinion,' said St Ambrose in his time, 'I am merely repeating the words of the Holy Spirit.'[2]

I have not overlooked the problems set by the world of to-day in regard to celibacy and virginity. Yet, this is neither a work of patristic scholarship nor a psychological study. It is an attempt to take the level of general readers interested in spiritual problems.

The doctrine of virginity is so intimately related to

[1] Père Camelot, in the book, full of freshness, which he has written on virgins in the primitive Church, *Virgines Christi*, could write: 'There is a spirituality belonging to virginity, and indeed without too great a paradox, one might say that it was all the spirituality that existed at that time.' This quotation can be compared with a statement of Simone Weil's in *Letter to a Religious*, which was published when my book was nearing completion. 'Christians have never said, that I know of,' she observes, 'why chastity (and particularly virginity) has a spiritual value. It is a serious gap, which keeps many souls away from Christ.' It is easy to see how people, even when they mean to be sincere, are open to error when they follow first impressions without objectively verifying them, or perhaps, obey their own self-taught defensive reactions when they find themselves arguing among difficulties that appear to be contradictory.

[2] *De virginibus*, I, 7, 35 P.L. (Patrologie Latine), 16, 199A.

the Christian conception of life present and to come, with the doctrines of the goods of marriage and the goods of the spirit, that it must be of interest. All Christians, even those personally called to different vocations, must think with the Church and find in the Church's judgment a criterion for their own scales of value.

As I wrote these pages, however, inevitably my thoughts were directed especially to those men, and above all to those women, for whom this is no theoretical question or abstract speculation, but a reality that claims their deepest life in its relations with God in its importance within the Church, too. I hope my book will help them to understand the beauties and demands of a vocation whose grandeurs and difficulties unfold as the years pass. Its divine ideal excels our fumbling achievement, and even eludes our groping enquiry. As St Cyprian, in the Third Century, said, 'It is the flower from the Church's seed, the beauty and ornament of spiritual grace, a joyous inborn character, the perfect and entire masterpiece of praise and honour, the image of God, responding to the Lord's holiness, the most illustrious part of Christ's flock.'[1]

The vocation of virginity is lived in two principal forms, either by official consecration in community life, or, in the world, by a deliberate choice of conscience that brings new life to the ordinary single life. Sometimes, in the first case, virginity itself is blurred by the complex organization of religious life. In the second case, it is more sincerely felt as the primary motive of the secret conscience, a principle of living as well as a constant reaction against worldly environment. It is never, in either case, negative, but always positive,

[1] *De habitu virginum*, 4, M.P.L., IV, 443 A.

rising to the level of the most lofty, most beautiful and most stripping of loves. 'That soul is virgin who is wedded to God,'[1] said St Ambrose, and the hermit of the Sahara found almost identical words when he meditated the subject. '. . . Virginity, chastity, these are not the condition of an unmarried soul; on the contrary, they are the condition of a soul married to a dearly loved spouse, to the perfect spouse, perfectly beautiful, holy, lovable. . . .'[2]

Others have entered this way of life by means of a cross that has ruined their life and desolated their hearts. At a date when born Christians were few, widows were the first to discover the meaning of this vocation. 'Those virgins who are called widows,'[3] said St Ignatius of Antioch in the early years of the Second Century. Apparently he meant that the first people wishing to consecrate themselves to virginity in the Christian community joined a group of widows; but Tertullian, a century later, spoke of widows who were 'maidens for God.'[4] His words show well enough the likenesses uniting these vocations, the divine call making itself heard through human grief.[5]

Others, again, are celibates of necessity, because of human ties, work, or circumstances that have put marriage out of their reach against their will. The doctrine of Christian virginity can illumine their involuntary celibacy, giving their affliction a divine

[1] *De virginibus*, I, 8, 52. P.L., 16, 202 D.

[2] P. de Foucauld, *Ecrits spirituels*, Retraite a Nazareth.

[3] To the people of Smyrna, XIII, i, ed. Camelot, *Sources chretiennes*, 1944.

[4] P.L., i, 1280.

[5] St Ignatius of Antioch in a letter to Polycarp gives the following counsel: 'Do not neglect the widows; after the Lord, it is you who should take care of them.'

direction, helping them to gain through self-sacrifice some of the goods they would not have chosen.

In none of these cases should the extolling of virginity lead to disparagement of the dignity of marriage, the great sacrament 'which Christian virgins must honour in humility,' as St Francis of Sales said. Still less should it lead to forgetting that a counsel of perfection underlies every Christian vocation.[1]

In one of his many writings in praise of Christian virginity, St Ambrose declared: 'I do not advise against marriage, but I list the fruits of holy virginity. The latter indeed is the gift for a few while marriage is for all; and there would be no virginity without homes to give it birth.'[2] 'We do not extol one vocation with the object of disparaging the others.'[3]

The Church needs all vocations and all functions to build her body in charity. Where would the body be without the manifold variety and the unity of the members? Could there be Christian motherhood without virginal self-effacement? Could there be virginity without the fertility of motherhood? The Christian virgin has a duty of considering the goods of marriage. By knowing what she is renouncing, she will make her offering in full enlightenment, and will realize the worth of the goods of another kind promised to her. Seeking no human reward from her consecration, she knows

[1] *Perfection chrétienne et vie conjugale*, Coll. *Le coeur et la croix*, Ed. Cerf.

[2] *De virginibus*, I, 7, 35, P.L., 16, 199 A. Monsignor Guilibert used to like telling a story about this, full of subtle mischief. Towards the end of last century, a great preacher was praising inordinately consecrated celibacy. One of his hearers, a countrywoman from Berry, said to him, both to compliment him and bring him back to a more realistic view of things, 'Oh, Father, what a good thing for us that your mother thought differently. . . .'

[3] *De viduis*, IV, 23. P.L., 16, 241 D.

that it will give her, even in this life, the Cross and persecution, but also the 'hundredfold' counted out with God's great generosity. Although to belong undividedly to Christ she must be without worldly care, she cannot be ignorant of the married state, for she will want to outdo[1] it in devotion so as to live as one entrusted with the management of God's business.

Married Christians can never understand, either, the value of chastity, the greatness of their undertaking or the ideal of spiritual maternity unless they consider and prize virginity. 'Let no one who has chosen marriage underrate total purity; and let no one committed to purity condemn marriage.'[2]

The profound interdependence of the two vocations, even for the full life of one child, is beautifully illustrated in Claudel's *l'Annonce faite à Marie*, when the leprous blue-eyed aunt restores to life her newly born nephew, who is given her blue eyes as a sign of the miracle; he needs 'a mother to bear him, a virginal victim to revive him . . . and give him her blue gaze.'

Since, from one point of view, celibacy is a human phenomenon arising from diverse causes, it is useful to study the social conditions which bring it about with a view to achieving balance and enrichment of the private life through several possibilities of fulfilment. Such study is the more needful in that, for many, the condition is one that they have scarcely chosen. On

[1] St Thérèse of the Child Jesus expressed herself on this subject, and the naive childishness of the form should not blind us to the profound meaning: 'When I overheard my cousin, who was newly married, in the parlour talking about the care she took of her husband, I felt my heart tremble; it shall not be said, thought I to myself, that a woman in the world does more for her husband, an ordinary mortal, than I for my well-beloved Jesus.'

[2] St Ambrose, *De virginitate*, VI. 34. P.L., 16, 273 A.

the other hand, there is the vocation presented and received wholly as a gift. It will be lived the more successfully because guided by a higher light and a clearer knowledge of its riches and demands. Its restraints as well as its fruitfulness arise only from 'the sword of God's word',[1] said Origen, following the thread of one of the earliest of Christian thoughts, which presents continence 'as the daughter of faith.'[2]

I have written my study from this point of view; from this very fact I must at once acknowledge its inevitable inadequacy. It is comparatively easy to define a psychological state, to trace the causes and consequences of a social phenomenon, or to enumerate the circumstances, favourable or unfavourable, in which it is lived; but human words can never plumb a mystery or lay bare the divine demands and promises. Here, as in all that touches on faith, the infinite crosses the finite, producing a mystery that outsoars our grasp. I shall be content if I draw some Christians to look attentively at this ideal offered by God so that they meditate anew the depth of the human heart and the perpetual youth of the Gospel.

My book is divided into three sections. First, it studies the goods of Virginity described in the divine Words. Secondly it reviews its difficulties, and goes on to describe, lastly, the conditions for its fulfilment.

I end here with a quotation from the deeply Christian prayer of St Hilary written to his daughter, in which he recalls at once the mystery, the beauty, the demands and the great price of virginity. 'I heard that a young man had a pearl, and I wanted to buy it for you; neither the light of heaven, nor the blue of the ocean,

[1] *Commentaries on St Matthew*, XV, 4. P.G., 13, 1263 A.
[2] Hermas' *Pastor Vision*, 3, 8, 4. P.G., 2, 906.

nor the magnificence of nature equal it . . . it guards against illness, against old age and death. It replaces all other jewels and confounds them.'[1] Or perhaps the greatest of the Western Doctors expresses this thought best. Père de Grandmaison, reviewing the testimonies to Christ through the ages, says:

'Perhaps it is in the book *Holy Virginity* that we must seek the most moving outpourings of Monica's son. In that, he anticipates the best things said after him by the sweetest friends of Christ. Why should I not quote these movingly beautiful and melancholy words in which St Augustine wishes for those happier than himself the only shade of intimacy with his Master forbidden him by his past life?[2]

' "This Lamb," he says in a commentary on the famous text of the Apocalypse, "this Lamb treads the virginal path. How can they follow him who have lost a gift never to be replaced? You, virgins of Christ, follow him in good time. . . . Follow him, preserving with perseverance what you vowed in the ardour of your souls. . . . The multitude of the faithful who cannot, in this, follow the Lamb with you, will see you without envy; and rejoicing with you, they will find in you what they do not possess in themselves." '[3]

[1] Abridged from letter to his daughter Abra, 2, 3 and 4. P.L., 10, 549 B and 550 A and B.

[2] Père de Grandmaison, *Jésus-Christ*, 9th edition, vol. II, p. 638.

[3] St Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, M.L., XLII, 412.

Part I

THE GOODS OF VIRGINITY

THE PERFECTION OF CHASTITY

THE realm of sex, with the excesses and perversions which it often engenders, is one of the places where the 'monstrous' state of mankind most clearly appears. Genesis teaches us that it was through becoming ashamed of his own body that man became conscious of his sin and his falling-off.

Before the Fall, the soul, in perfect submission to God, had full lordship over all the powers, spiritual and corporal, that mould human complexity, made as it is of the flowing together of the world of spirit and the world of flesh in a single being. The soul, depending from God, caused all the elements of this human synthesis to rise upwards. From this very fact, all within it was order, harmony and life. When he detached himself from God by sin, man lost his centre of gravity. He found his support on the ground, and all became disorder, strife and misery. Cut off from his vital centre, he saw corruption eating into his devitalized and divided being. His unity, life and health are in God. Outside him, man becomes wavering and multiform, capable of lovely aspirations or of the worst basenesses, the cruellest, meanest and sometimes even

the least intelligent of animals, when he ought to be 'a little less than the angels . . . crowned . . . with glory and honour.' (Psalms, 8, 6.)

To understand the profound nature of this teaching, we must remember two things. That this is not the only realm where disorder has developed as a result of sin; and that sex is bound up with man's original nature.

Cracks in the base of a ruined building, fallen columns, these tell us of the collapse of the summit and the destruction of the capitals and the front. The strange cruelty that makes a man rejoice in his brother's harm, the absurd greed that leads a business man to sacrifice himself to the abstract figures of a wealth that is useless to him to-day and that he must leave behind this evening, above all, the depravities of the religious sense distorted into witchcraft, sacred debauchery, idolatry and a taste for sacrilege, these are subjects to horrify anyone ignorant of the mystery of fallen humanity, redeemed by mercy. Newman admitted that to think of human wretchedness after meditating the goodness and the presence of God was to experience the terror of a man who does not see his reflection when he looks in a mirror. This is enough to show that it would be unwise to attribute all the havoc wrought by original sin to sex; equally unwise not to see how greatly these disorders are inherent in our nature, compounded of flesh and spirit. Thibon has remarked profoundly, 'Human sexuality is confronted with an inevitable choice, to be disciplined and raised by spiritual love, or to be prostituted by spiritual sin.'[1]

There is in instinct a cosmic impulse larger than

[1] *What God has Joined* (Hollis and Carter), 'The Paradox of Love.'

the individual, carrying him away to serve the ends of the species. From this it derives its characteristic strength and its biological urgency. The spur is the acute pleasure it gives. Nature seems to have joined the greatest enjoyment to the most imperious need, harnessing personal gratification to the service of the species.[1]

Egoism would suborn this power, would monopolize the pleasure for its own ends, forcing the spirit to connive at the perversion of diverting the stream of life. Man, in this, becomes more bestial than the beasts, violating nature's laws and ending up in the most distorted aberrations. To understand the real importance of sexuality in man, we should never lose sight of the fact that instinct ought to co-operate in the creation of souls, immortal souls called into being to praise God to eternity; that in humanity restored by Christ, God himself united his children to sanctify them and make them fit to be used for the increase of his kingdom in charity. The very body becomes 'a member of Christ' and 'the temple of the Holy Ghost.' (I Corinthians, 6, 15, 19,) It should never be forgotten.

[1] The power of attraction is the raw material of sexuality existing in every human being. Starting from it, affective evolution develops through various stages, from egocentricity (where the ego is the object of all available love) which is normal in children to the self-sacrificing love of which a grown-up person ought to be capable. In conjugal love, the beloved can be loved either for herself (or himself) as an object or as an instrument of pleasure, which is to say possessively or egocentrically, or in a mixture of both.

The love which is also charity will use these affective resources for its own ends and will make them rise to a superhuman level. Yet it must not be forgotten that the supernatural life springs primarily from the raw material. To forget this structure would be to deny human facts.

In this dual light—psychology illuminating the human heart, and faith recalling the divine intentions—the importance and beauty of chastity are easy to see. It is a virtue that takes hold of what is most irrational and makes it co-operate in the life of the soul, sending the light of the spirit and its purposes right down into the flesh.

Far from destroying the realm of instinct, supernatural life disciplines it and rationalizes it, of course, but also it lifts it to a divine plane by opening the doors of Christian love and the grandeur of marriage in the new Union. Yet for his own, Christ threw open an even higher way towards the spiritual peaks, namely, the path of virginity. When the apostles were dismayed by his commandments for marriage, the Master answered them, 'All men take not this word, but they to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who were born so from their mother's womb: and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. He that can take, let him take it.' (St Matthew, 19, 11–12.)

Writing to the Corinthians years later, St Paul develops this thought, making its spiritual meaning explicit. After reminding of the duties of marriage and the danger of incontinence, he goes on, 'But I speak this by indulgence, not by commandment. For I would that all men were even as myself. But every one hath his proper gift from God: one after this manner, and another after that. But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they so continue, even as I.' (1 Cor., 7. 6–8.) He recalls energetically the indissolubility of marriage, putting his theme in the context of Christ's declaration reported by St Matthew; then he continues:

'Now, concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord: but I give counsel, as having obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful. I think therefore that this is good for the present necessity: that it is good for a man so to be. Art thou bound to a wife? Seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? Seek not a wife. But if thou take a wife, thou hast not sinned. And if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned: nevertheless, such shall have tribulation of the flesh. But I spare you.

'This therefore I say, brethren: The time is short. It remaineth, that they also who have wives be as if they had none: And they that weep, as though they wept not: and they that rejoice, as if they rejoiced not: and they that buy, as though they possessed not: And they that use this world, as if they used it not. For the fashion of this world passeth away.

'But I would have you to be without solicitude. He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord: how he may please God. But he that is with a wife is solicitous for the things of the world: how he may please his wife. And he is divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord: that she may be holy both in body and in spirit: But she that is married thinketh on the things of the world: how she may please her husband. And this I speak for your profit, not to cast a snare upon you, but for that which is decent and which may give you power to attend upon the Lord, without impediment.

'But if any man think that he seemeth dishonoured with regard to his virgin, for that she is above the age, and it must so be: let him do what he will. He sinneth not, if she marry. For he that hath determined, being steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but having power of his own will: and hath judged this in his heart, to keep his virgin, doth well. Therefore, both he that giveth his virgin in marriage doth well: and he that giveth her not doth better.

'A woman is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth: but if her husband die she is at liberty. Let her marry to whom she will: only in the Lord. But more blessed shall she be if she so remain, according to my counsel. And

I think that I also have the spirit of God.' (1 Cor., 7, 25–40.)[1]

Finally, the Apocalypse tells the same story, revealing the splendours of the eternity and the life of the Church as seen from above by the miraculous light of prophecy. The quotation is famous, but it must be repeated here:

'And I beheld: and lo a Lamb stood upon mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty-four thousand, having his name and the name of his Father written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, as the noise of many waters and as the voice of great thunder. And the voice which I heard was as the voice of harpers, harping on their harps. And they sung as it were a new canticle, before the throne and before the four living creatures and the ancients: and no man could say the canticle, but those hundred forty-four thousand who were purchased from the earth. These are they who were not defiled with women: for they are virgins. These follow the lamb whithersoever he goeth.

[1] Undoubtedly the current belief of Christ's imminent return in glory would give these words especial force which the Corinthians would keenly feel. It is impossible to forget, however, that the sharp sense of the fleetingness of time is indissolubly linked to the sense of eternity. St Peter says, 'But of this one thing be not ignorant, my beloved, that one day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord delayeth not his promise, as some imagine.' (2 St Peter 3, 8–9). It is then an essential feature of the Christian soul which knows at all times that 'time hauls up the sails' (time is running short). In a Christian heart, all time would be short for the purpose of winning Christ and doing his will, for it seems short because of the devil's 'great wrath.' (Apoc. 12, 12.) St Paul's observations have a universal application all the more because they are directly founded on the inspiration of the Lord, who knows the future and the present. Christian tradition has therefore always given a universal meaning to these words.

We ought not to forget, either, that since Easter, we are 'in the fullness of time', 'at its end', since we have entered the dispensation of grace and time will bring no change in this order until the Second Coming. It would greatly go beyond my present intention to make a detailed exegesis of these texts, and I refer the reader to the commentaries of Père Lagrange and Père Allo.

These were puchased from among men, the firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth there was found no lie: for they are without spot before the throne of God.'

(Apocalypse, 14., 1–5.)

All medieval theology, as well as the liturgy, continuously applied this passage to virginity; they liked to emphasize that the privileged ones follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They do not necessarily stay more near to him. Only charity can gauge such nearness. A sinner with greater love of God is nearer than loveless celibates.

Christ's example, too, attests the high price of this virtue. He was born from virginity, and the blaze of the miracle shows clearly his tastes and purposes. He also desired virginity for his adopted father, for his forerunner, and for the beloved disciple, as he chose it for himself.[1]

It is touching to find one of the oldest advocates of celibacy giving as a reason for his choice his wish to honour our Lord's flesh. 'If anyone is able to live in chastity in order to honour our Lord's flesh, let him live in humility.' These words come from the earliest years of the Second Century, and they were written before his martyrdom by the aged Bishop of the community where the disciples received the name of Christians for the first time. It is, then, through cherishing her earliest memories and zealous for her mission that the Church defended virginal celibacy against the attacks of the Reformers at the Council of Trent. Her severity against those who censured it was the expression

[1] To quote Michelet's beautiful words: 'Jesus Christ almost deserted his mother so as to embrace the human race; dying, he entrusted her to John, thinking of one thing only: the salvation of the whole world. He lived virgin, he died virgin; from thence comes the great sanction for the celibacy of the priesthood.'

of her jealous protection of what God, her Master, had so much at heart. The tenth canon on the sacrament of marriage reads thus:

'If any should say that the conjugal state is to be preferred to the state of virginity or celibacy (St Matthew, 19, 11; Cor., 7, 22 ff., 38–40) and that it is not *better* and *happier* to remain in virginity and celibacy than to be united in marriage, let him be anathema.'

The italics are mine.

It is not off the point to observe that more than one school of wisdom outside Christianity has perceived the spiritual importance of virginity. For some, indeed, it led to a more or less complete condemnation of fleshly values. St Paul denounced them as 'seared consciences' (I Timothy, 4, 2); but for many of them the adoption of virginity appears as the necessary condition of a high mystical life. Unhappily, pantheism, which looks upon God as an impersonal being, and the search for absorption into the Whole, give to certain Hindu practices the aspect of a technique or of a performance. It is none the less true that perseverance in seeking detachment in order to attain the absolute shows the importance they attach to continence in the spiritual quest. These doctrines, by their variety, could give rise to misunderstandings. It is, therefore, important to understand thoroughly the character of Christian virginity.

Positive assertion of the excellence of virginity contains not the slightest censure of the values of the flesh, still less of the heart. St Gregory of Nyssa said this energetically, relying on St Paul's authority quoted above: 'Whoever fails in modesty is a libertine; whoever practises it to excess has a seared conscience as the apostle says; the one surrenders himself to pleasure

like a beast; the other despises and rejects marriage as if it were adultery.'[1] The Church has unremittingly condemned heretics opposed to marriage, and she has always been mindful that it was a wedding-feast that the Master chose to honour with his first miracle, making it the occasion for manifesting his divine power. Ecclesiastical councils and pontifical encyclicals have striven to make this clear. Far from allowing herself to be side-tracked to the right or the left, she has continued to affirm with equal serenity the excellence of marriage and the super-excellence of virginity. It is, after all, logical that theological and pastoral endeavours to bring out the grandeur of marriage and its ideal should crown them by exalting virginity. Yet it must be clearly understood that it is not the technical fact of celibacy that achieves this worth. Here, as in all great love, 'it is the soul taking possession of the body' (Nietzsche). Virginity should be chaste love, love with a perfect and final chastity.

To be unmarried is nothing in itself. Not to want marriage is nothing. The value of a choice is to be gauged by its motive. Our Lord said it decisively, 'There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven' (St Mat., 19, 12), and St Paul ends his praise of virginity in words that leave no doubt of his thought. 'And I speak this for your profit, not to cast a snare upon you, but for that which is decent and which may give you power to attend upon the Lord, without impediment.' (I Cor., 7, 35.) It follows that to abstain from marriage out of distaste for the facts of sex—or so as to remain with one's parents, even in order to devote oneself to one's parents, or so

[1] *Life of Moses*, P.G., 44, 420, B.C.

as to live a freer life dedicated to study, or for some reason connected with health—is not Christian virginity in the true sense of the word. St Augustine said it: 'Neither do we praise in virgins the fact that they are virgins, but that, dedicated to God, they are virgins by virtue of continence filled with piety.'[1] The frequent and ardent praises of virginity in Christian literature and Church texts do not, then, in any way imply disapproval of marriage, or cast an evil eye upon the facts of the flesh or of love. Virginity is not for the disappointed, the unwanted, the incapable, but for those who of their own free will answer the call of Christ. St Athanasius wrote in one of his letters:

> 'For two ways are open in life: one is the lower and the more usual; it is the way of marriage; the other, on the contrary, is angelic and superior: virginity. If anyone choose the worldly way of marriage, I would say that in truth he does not sin, but there are precious and numerous gifts that he will not obtain. Still, he will receive some, since marriage carries interest at thirty to one. If, on the other hand, anyone has embraced the chaste and superior life, even though it be rougher and more difficult, he is enriched with more excellent gifts, he produces the perfect fruit, that is to say, the hundredfold.'[2]

The essential thing is the inward and final resolution neither to seek nor want sensual pleasure and to strive to keep the instinct for enjoyment strictly within these bounds. This is why virginity is before all else an affair of the soul and a choice of conscience. It is a choice containing something truly superhuman, and therefore it must correspond to a superhuman reality in order to reach its highest pitch. There only will it become possible and realizable, relying not upon technique or human

[1] *De sancta virginitate*, ii, P.L., 40, 401.
[2] *Letter to Ammunis.*

skill, but first and foremost upon supernatural means. It will even become fragrant with the celestial fragrance belonging to 'the fruits of the Holy Ghost'. St Thomas, when he considers the place given to chastity in St Paul's list of these fruits,[1] sees attributed to it first, the human toil, second the seed whence the fruit will spring (he means the word of faith), lastly the divine savour which comes from above.[2]

Because this entirely spiritual will is the real essence of virginity and the test of its worth, St Francis de Sales was able to call St Mary Magdalen, formerly a sinner, repentant and sanctified by her great love, 'the archvirgin'. For the same reason, married Christians may have more charity, even more chastity than anyone who keeps his celibacy with sorrow and regret.

It is none the less true that in itself virginal chastity is greater than married chastity or the ordinary chastity of the unmarried, because of its final and total character. Not content merely to dam up the trends of instinct within obedience to the divine law, it renounces them entirely, resisting all impulses towards them, in order to gain spiritual ends. It would be heresy to have any doubt about it, for our Lord's teaching is clear. It goes without saying that in each particular case, it is the motive of choice and the fervour of love that make up the high value of the virgin state. This brings us to consideration of the other element of virginity, no less integral for having second place.

This is physical integrity; or absence of physical experience. It must be understood that although this is necessary for complete and perfect chastity, which would

[1] Galatians, 5, 22, 23.
[2] Suppl., 96, art. 2, 3 and 4, and Ia, ii, 70,

lack something without it, again it is of importance to virginity only in so far as what has happened is the result of the will.[1] Integrity can be lost through violence or by accident; an unwished-for sensation may occur in sleep or through a particular constitution, without entailing moral responsibility, the only quality which makes abstention valuable. All in Christianity is to do with the soul. This can never be said too often, for this strong light prevents meanness and complication, banishes scruples and perversions, and destroys at one blow all attacks on Christian celibacy by uniting the total demand with healthful liberty in the fullness of divine Love.

It must be remembered, lastly, for the full understanding of the value of Christian virginity, that it is a response, not to an order or a precept, but to a counsel. It outstrips one good in order to grasp a better. Our Lord spoke distinctly on this point: 'Not all understand this word, but only those to whom it is given . . . let him who can take it, take it.' (Matthew, 19, 11.) The apostle is still more explicit. 'Now, concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord: but I give counsel, as having obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful.' (1 Corinthians, 7, 25.)

A word of caution is necessary. This is not an order that would cause separation from God if disobeyed. It is offered to the whole Christian community, and all must see its wisdom and its beauty. Yet it interests only

[1] A detail serves to show how far the thought of St Thomas, although it is realistic, is from any narrowness, remaining loftily spiritual. Imagining a case in which the physical integrity were damaged without the consent of the will, he states that it would affect the virginity of the soul as if 'a foot or a hand' had been damaged. (IIa-IIae, art. i, ad 3.)

some willing ones 'to whom it is given'.[1] The caution is that no one can deeply understand virginity unless he considers its relationship to charity. A precept, if it is disobeyed, puts a soul in danger of eternal damnation; the soul is confronted by an inescapable duty. A counsel, on the other hand, is offered to generous love and it respects the liberty of the lover. No words can describe the close connexion between the new Law and the counsels it offers. One gives orders to a servant but one requests a friend. One suggests to him what is best while leaving him free to make his own decision. The wisdom which sets a difficult, superhuman ideal is joined to a respectful tenderness that waits for the free response of love.

It would, of course, be a poor understanding of the wisdom and holiness of Divine Love to think they may be disregarded or rejected without sin; we shall return to this when we discuss vocations. Yet God claims a gift made in the joyful generosity of free choice; and the disciple answers the divine invitation so that he may love better and aspire more perfectly to the purity of heart that is allowed to see God, even in this life.

Charity can make every thing supernatural and divine, affections and pleasures as well as duties and troubles. It follows that Christian marriage is holy and sanctifies, since it is made a part of the order of divine life; but

[1] Origen (*In Rom.*, x, 14. P.G., 14, 1275 B) makes a strong distinction between precepts and counsels as early as the beginning of the Third Century: 'Precepts are given so that we should discharge them as a debt. The Saviour speaks thus in the Gospel: "So you also, when you shall have done all these things that are commanded you, say: We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which we ought to do." (St Luke, 17, 10.) What we do about our duty we do not do because of precepts; virginity, for example, is not discharged as a duty nor is it required by a commandment, but it is suggested as something above a duty.'

the disciple committed to the path of virginity desires to waste no drop of affection, to let no human preoccupation distract his soul. So, he will be more closely united, more concentrated and more effective in his love of God. 'For the kingdom of heaven' comprises at once attentiveness to the inward presence—since 'The kingdom of heaven is within you'—and also devotion to all that may help to re-establish the Kingdom in this world. This is the plan, indeed the soul, of virginity. This is what gives its beauty and its vastness. It is given entirely to the love of God. This is perhaps why it is likened to a hard diamond, incorruptible, born in fire, the fire changed to light.

God offers, here, in this life, the possibility of infinite love to man's infinite need for love, to the unfathomable capacity for loving scooped in him by the Breath which created him in God's image. Much more than virginity by itself is needed to deserve the beatitude of the pure of heart, to whom it is promised that they shall see God. The virginity that liberates and unites all the strength of the heart is one of the privileged roads to this beatitude. It is described as beautiful because it renders the whole soul transparent to receive spiritual light, laying it open to the entrance of 'beauty which is ancient and always new'. St Gregory says that it is 'The method and the means for making life divine.'[1]

[1] *De virginitate*, 5. P.G., 46, 348 B.

THE FREE OFFERING[1]

VIRGINITY has the magnificence of a gift, and since this royal gift is offered to God himself, it possesses the nobleness of sacrifice in the fullest sense of the word. This was the aspect that struck the earliest Christians when they turned their attention to it during the period of persecution and martyrdom. St Cyprian expresses it vigorously. 'The martyrs take no notice of the world or the flesh. They fight a momentous battle painfully and unremittingly. You also, as you come after them for the reward, must display courage closely following their courage.'[2]

When the early commentators studied the parable of the Sower and the seed whose fertility varies with the soil on which it is dropped, they considered martyrdom as the seed that produced the hundredfold, and virginity the seed that produced sixtyfold. Later, when persecution had ceased and the possibility of martyrdom was

[1] *Oblation de choix* (oblation by choice). This is Canon Osty's translation of the word 'firstfruits' in Apocalypse 14, 4, and applying the passage to the whole Christian community. The idea of 'oblation' or offering is one of the most important essentials of Christian virginity. Père Camelot has summed up the passage from Origen quoted in this chapter: 'To devote one's virginity to God is to give him the best thing one possesses.' This view corresponds to what modern psychologists term the attitude of receptivity and oblativity. It brings also the joyful generosity that God desires in all gifts (2 Corinthians, 9, 7). We shall consider later the various conditions of the gift.

[2] *De habitu virginum*, 21. P.L., 4, 461.

no longer a daily preoccupation, virginity was considered as the seed that produces a hundredfold, for it was recognized as the most beautiful human response to Divine Grace. The commentators see it as perfection in the logic of love. 'Let him be fixed in your whole heart who, for your sake, was fixed to the cross,' said St Augustine to Christian virgins.[1]

'Magnificence' is the word most spontaneously written by St Thomas Aquinas in his analysis of virginity.[2] For the Angelic Doctor, here again characteristically the disciple of the philosophers, the virtue that controls current expenditure according to reason, avoiding equally meanness and extravagance, is liberality. But magnificence is the virtue of grand expenditure, of costly enterprises demanded for noble and ideal purposes. It is, on the human plane, the virtue of a Maecenas, of sumptuous builders, of bold pioneers; the virtue of the great Christian projects on the plane of charity; but here as everywhere, these planes intersect.

St Thomas sees virginity as having this quality. Chastity restrains instinct within the bounds of duty, subduing it by the dictates of conscience. Virginity makes a total sacrifice of it for spiritual ends. Emphatically, it is not the meanness that self-centredly withholds; nor is it the prodigality that squanders irrationally. It is magnificence governing its spending to the scale of the lofty designs in view. It gives all; but what it gives is neither excessive nor disproportionate to the good it intends to purchase. On the contrary, as virginity itself knows, what it gives is infinitely below any real price.

[1] *De sancta virginitate*, 55. P.L., 40, 428.

[2] *Loc. cit.*

'And I preferred her before kingdoms and thrones, and esteemed riches as nothing in comparison to her. Neither did I compare unto her any precious stone; for all gold in comparison of her is as a little sand, and silver in respect to her shall be counted as clay. I loved her above health and beauty, and chose to have her instead of light: for her light cannot be put out.'[1]

To give all for love is a small thing; to be afraid of risking everything for it is to know nothing of love's power. 'Many waters cannot quench charity, neither can the floods drown it; if a man shall give the substance of his house for love, he shall despise it as nothing.' (Cant., 8, 7.)

The passion for discovery has been furthered by 'magnificent' people who have sacrificed all for their research; surely the search for Truth itself, for the highest good, should find more magnificent, more daring champions? Let us consider what they sacrifice.

Those who exalt Christian virginity by running down the experience of the flesh and of love are the victims of a strange delusion. Virginity has never implied the slightest condemnation of marriage. 'He who gives his daughter in marriage does well'—he who does not does better (I Corinthians, 7, 38). Once again, the mind of the Church has always proclaimed the excellence of marriage, the super-excellence of virginity. She has condemned, turn by turn, the detractors of marriage and the opponents of virginity. Her voice at the nuptial benediction discloses to us her thought:

'O God who hast consecrated the mystery of marriage by a mystery so excellent that the sacred union between Christ and the Church was prefigured in advance by the nuptial contract. . . . give to it the benediction which is the

[1] Wisdom, 7, 8 ff.

only one not abolished by the punishment for original sin nor by the judgment of the Flood.'[1]

Virginity's gift must be seen in its truth, not merely humanly, but supernaturally. To see in it nothing more than a mutilation of the strongest, deepest instinct would be to narrow it to a conception false because inadequate. There must be added the joys and the wealth of love, a life renewed by 'help like unto itself' (Genesis, 2, 18), and the fulfilment of a dual unity, to quote the rich phrases of Scripture.

For a woman, there is still more to give up; motherhood with its unparalleled depth of experience where the joys of giving and of possessing are one, where life is lived in someone else to whom one has given life.

The celibate is usually without a home, too, and for a woman especially, a home is like an enlargement of her motherhood among all those she loves.

Human incompletion, solitude, insecurity, these are all accepted when a soul gives itself to Christ, ready to follow him everywhere along the road where he had nowhere to lay his head. The early liturgy for the consecration of virgins hymns the anthem, 'The kingdoms of the world and all the ornaments of the age, I have despised for the love of my Lord, Jesus Christ, whom I have loved, whom I have preferred, in whom I have put my trust. . . .'

There is hardly any need to dwell longer on this subject. Almost without exaggeration, the whole of literature deals with it, hardly pausing in its celebration of the joys and benefits of love and its omnipresence in the human heart.

It is not, however, the often dull and disappointing reality that is to be renounced, but the ideal possibility

[1] From the blessing in the Nuptial Mass.

imagined in its perfect beauty. What is to be renounced is the dream engendered by the first flights of budding love, the fresh and all-powerful impulse that leads to procreation. Its illusion is not that it knows this dream realizable, but that it thinks it can be realized without suffering and without rising above self. The Christian celibate does not renounce marriage merely as man conceives it. He envisages it as Christ ordained it, divine, a great mystery, and a union sealed by God. Virginity must not be compared to pagan marriage, but only to marriage between saints. The foundations are the same in both, certainly, but it is important to emphasize the distance set between the two by the illumination, the divine graces, and the ideal of Christian marriage. Marriage in Christ is a great sacrament, the expression as well as the source of the divine life, a co-operation in the creation and increase of the Mystical Body. Perfection is required from those whom God unites in this way, and perfection is bestowed. These are the divine possibilities that are also auspices when a virgin commits herself to answer Christ's call to grasp at an even higher reality.

Besides, the sacrifice, once made in a fire of complete magnanimity, does not kill the offering. The living being remains, complete with all his inclinations, and life brings him daily in contact with the joys he has renounced. The living flesh, the heart thirsting for love, both have become the absolute property of the Lord, but they are entrusted to our management until death. They have acquired a new value as consecrated things which engage God's own honour. All turnings-aside take on the grievousness of sacrilege, 'adultery by infidelity to God.'[1]

[1] St Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, 20. P.L., 4, 459 A.

The character of struggle and of persevering effort is what gives this sacrifice a special value that some of the Fathers did not hesitate to compare to martyrdom itself. A Christian writer said of St Thecla, 'She had that virginity that is a great martyrdom before martyrdom.'[1] The glorious victory won in this battle made medieval theology picture virginity as crowned in glory with a special halo. As we have seen, it was the Holy Ghost who threw open these glorious prospects when he revealed to the seer of Patmos the splendours reserved for virginal purity.

Without waiting for the sublime goods of the future, leaving aside for the moment the union with Christ which is the essence of virginity and its purpose, leaving out also the spiritual fertility and its place in the realm of souls, there is a human fulfilment, part of the hundredfold promised to those who leave all to follow Christ, a kind of wonderful surplus given to those who look first of all for the Kingdom of God.

Because it is a way of 'losing one's life in this world', virginity becomes a means of finding it. Without exaggeration, it can be shown that what seems, at the beginning, to be a mutilation, develops at its peak into the fulfilment of the human personality. By spiritualizing the body, by unifying the emotional powers, by employing every energy, virginity gives the personality a supernatural unity, loftiness, and vigour. Some have dared to ask whether Christianity has devirilized manhood. It is impossible even to ask such a question about womanhood, so greatly is the position of women lowered outside the Gospels. Without fear of

[1] Eulogium of St Thecla, attributed to St John Chrysostom, P. G., 50, 745.

counterfeiting or debasement, the Church can show the perfection of womanhood developed by the breath of the Holy Ghost in her saints, particularly in her virgin saints.

As regards the life of the body, virginity, having the appearance of death and renunciation, is life and fulfilment. 'To offer oneself to God, and to be pleasing to him not by the deserts of someone else but by one's own, this surpasses in perfection and in sublimity all other offerings.'[1] And lo! in return for this human gift, God offers his very self to his own.

This entire, suppliant offering of the self to God is the essence of virginity, and the formula is the central theme of the consecration of virgins. 'Accept me, O Lord, according to thy word, so that no injustice rule in me.' But the bishop had been asked to consecrate them to be united to our Lord Jesus Christ, to unite them to the Son of the Most High God. The consecration implies a whole manner of life, described by Origen (he is gladly quoted because he represents the oldest tradition and he is one of the masters of the first school of Christian wisdom) thus:

'He who lives in chastity,' he said, 'has dedicated his body to God according to the words of St Paul: "And the virgin thinketh on the things of the Lord: that she may be holy both in body and in spirit." (1 Corinthians, 7, 34.) The fact that he uses the word "holy" has this reference: that "holy" is applied to people who are dedicated to God. . . . We may understand from this what it is for a man to dedicate himself to God. If thou devotest thyself to God, thou must imitate the beast (offered in sacrifice) which must no longer serve human purposes, nor do anything whatsoever concerning men and the present life. But all that

[1] Origen, Num. hom. 24, 2. P.G.

concerns the soul and the observance of divine worship, that is what thou must do and consider.'[1]

This surely describes well enough the loftiness of such a life.

[1] Origen, Num. hom. 24, 2. P.G., 12, 761 B.

THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

TO see no more in Christian virginity than gift or sacrifice would be to have a poor idea of it and falsify its most profound purposes. It is essentially and above all a seeking for union with God.

In the very middle of the Second Century, Athenagoras asserted this to the Emperor and to a pagan world astounded by this new idea: 'You will find many of our people, men as well as women, who live outside marriage until their extreme old age, in the hope of finding a closer union with God.'[1] His saying faithfully echoes the words with which the apostle closed his praise of virginity: 'And this I speak for your profit, not to cast a snare upon you, but for that which is decent and which may give you power to attend upon the Lord, without impediment.' (I Corinthians, 7, 35.)

Virginity renounces marriage, which can be one of the most precious of human goods, to go to God 'without impediment'. It is the same idea as the counsel of the Gospels, where a better path is indicated for those 'to whom it is given'. There must be no misunderstanding. There can be no greater good than Charity, which unites to God and is the ideal held out without stint and without exception to all men. We concern ourselves here with a more direct road towards this goal. One of the wonders of the New Testament is the teaching

[1] Supplicia de Christianis, XXXIII, P.G., 6, 965 A.

that counsels a way of life uniting wisdom and divine condescension, enabling the disciple to surpass the required minimum and to give spontaneous love. It is here that the teaching has its full sense. Marriage is good, divinely good. It is 'What God hath joined' and it should be loved according to Charity. Its ideal is the love Christ bears to his Church. This light transfigures it. It entails worries and responsibilities, joys, afflictions, affections which absorb the mind and divide the heart because they are not directly of God. To renounce it, therefore, not through egoism or meanness, but 'for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven', for the sake of loving and serving God, makes a soul free to concentrate the whole attention on things divine, to concentrate all the wealth of emotion on trying to please God and to love him. The capacity to love, the ability to be attentive, all human energies, are limited. They cannot concentrate on different objects with equal reality, intensity and integrity. The excellence of virginity is that it 'thinketh . . . that she may be holy in body and in spirit.' (I Cor., 7, 34.)

This life has no other significance than that of being given and dedicated to Christ, united to him and dependent upon him. 'The joy of Christ's virgins is Christ, in Christ, with Christ, after Christ, by Christ and for Christ.'[1] How should they not be acknowledged as 'married to Christ'?

Tertullian used this description as early as the beginning of the third century.[2] A century later, Agnes, confronting her pagan judges, alluded to the mystical marriage which engaged her life. Shortly afterwards, St Athanasius, speaking of Christian virgins, said, 'The

[1] St Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, 28. P.L., 40, 411.
[2] De oratione, 22. P.L., i, 1188 B.

Church customarily calls them "brides of Christ" ',[1] and this shows how deeply the idea is embedded in the Church's thought. It must be recognized, however, that the expression has often been spoiled by a careless misuse of words, and has sometimes confused the issue by a dubious sentimentality that has discredited it. From this comes a certain amount of embarrassment when attempting to speak of it. Yet it does not appear possible to understand fully the mystical nature of Christian virginity without it.

In the present period of confused thought, it is perhaps not irrelevant to remark that the relationship with God is between spirit and Spirit. Although everything in human beings may be 'sexuate', as has been asserted, it is none the less true that this is a wholly secondary fact, whatever the metaphor or the allegory used. Descriptive expressions often take their colour from a historical period, sometimes even from the grammatical gender of words. St Bernard speaks of the soul (anima) as 'Bride of the Word (Verbum)', just as Blessed Henry Suso calls himself 'servant and lover of Eternal Wisdom.' St John of the Cross and even Père de Foucauld look upon Christ "as husband of their souls", 'Jesus the Bridegroom.'

The New Testament, insisting on the incommunicably personal relationship of God with each of his people, has applied to it as a matter of course what the Old Testament had said of the relations between God and his people:

'The Betrothed, then, the husband of a pure and chaste soul, is the Word of God who is Christ the Lord, as the Apostle says, "I would present you all as pure virgins to the sole Spouse." '[2]

[1] Apology to Constantius. P.G., 25, 640 A.

[2] Origen, Num hom. P.G., 12, 728 C.

The idea of wedded love and of passion, found in the prophets, and the whole substance of the Canticle of Canticles, to be found again in the Apocalypse, provides theme, style and splendid imagery for the life of union with God, and for the experiences and transports of charity. It is only one way of expressing it, for the reality far surpasses words 'in spirit and in truth'. It is independent of our human state.

Yet it is impossible not to see that women are given the preference when the words 'bride of Christ'[1] are used. This symbolism is the substance of the liturgy for the consecration of virgins. The female, less divided into compartments in her feelings and her activities, enters wholly into her love, and her wholeness gives special depth to her virginal love offered to God. Woman, also, by nature less complete and more intent upon completion in love and in motherhood, receives from Christ supernatural and incomparable completeness. Christ himself is her strength, her wisdom, her crown, in a word, her head; the better because by nature's law, the man is 'the head'[2] of the woman, as St Paul says. Although these and many other reasons have given the idea of 'betrothal to the Lord' a special appropriateness to womanly virginity, the words must retain their highest meaning of spirit to Spirit when we seek some of the associations suggested by this image.

The first idea suggested by the analogy is that of mutual choice, with marked predominance of the husband's initiative. The state is 'for those to whom it

[1] The character of *bride of Christ* is given by grace to every spiritual creature; but only woman has the privilege of representing and signifying it. From this derives her mission within the Church, and from this her attitude of soul in charity. Cf. A.-M. Henry, *Le mystère de l'homme et de la femme*, in *La Vie Spirituelle*, May, 1949.

[2] I Corinthians, 11, 3.

is given.' The virgin's vocation comes in the form of a call from Christ, a call that usually appears as an awareness that this road leads to greater love, or that the sacrifice is needed for a higher life.[1]

This awareness is a gift of grace, the brightness of the Divine Choice coming upon us. St Francis de Sales speaks in gracious terms of 'the demand in marriage made by his Majesty', in face of which the Director can only withdraw. This demand, even when it is urgent, is not a command but a call. The soul answers it in all the spontaneous generosity of freedom. She accepts for ever. Her vows are taken before the Church in heaven and on earth, but she keeps the awareness of her own and of God's liberty. 'He hath regarded the humility of his handmaid.' (St Luke, 1, 48.) 'And going up into a mountain, he called unto him whom he would himself.' (Mk. 3, 13.) 'And Jesus, looking on him, loved him' (Mk. 10, 21), offering him the short cut which rises straight to perfection and to intimacy with our Lord. Later, he said, 'You have not chosen me; but I have chosen you.' (St John, 15, 16.) It is to express this divine choice that the liturgy delights to repeat the verse of the Psalm which applies to our Lord's nuptial purpose: 'And the King shall greatly desire thy beauty.'[2] It would, however, be ignorance of the truth of Divine Love to think that the chosen one possessed beauty before being chosen by Love, a Love that chooses it and endows it with the power of being divinely seductive. The only dowry the divine Spouse asks for in the soul is a capacity large enough to receive his gifts. In this light, one cannot resist re-reading St Ambrose on the psalm quoted above:

[1] Cf. Part III, Ch. ix: The Gift of a Vocation.
[2] Psalms, 44, 12.

'And observe from the testimony of Holy Scripture all that the Holy Ghost brings you: royalty, gold, beauty. Royalty, either because you are wedded to the Eternal King or else because, having a victorious soul, you are no longer captive of the lure of pleasure, but you govern it like a queen. Gold, because just as this substance becomes more precious, when it is tested in the fire, so the beauty of virginity reaches its perfection when it is consecrated to the divine Spirit. Beauty, for who can imagine greater beauty than is possessed by her who is loved by the King, approved by the Judge, awarded to the Lord and consecrated to God; always wife, always virgin so that there is no end to the love and no tarnishing of modesty.'[1]

God himself expressed his magnificent purpose. 'Therefore, behold, I will allure her and will lead her into the wilderness: and will speak to her heart. . . . And I will espouse thee to me for ever: and I will espouse thee to me in justice and judgment and in mercy and in commiserations: And I will espouse thee to me in faith: and thou shalt know that I am the Lord.'[2]

The honour of Christ is implicated in such a human life in a particular way by the very fact of consecration. The ring the bishop gives the Christian virgin on the day of her consecration has been blessed to express 'her entire faith and her sincere fidelity'. If she breaks her word, she brings dishonour on him whose name she bears. As Origen said, reflecting on the soul's union with the Word, every sin is a sort of 'sacrilegious adultery.'[3] It is even worse here because of the specific consecration, and the terrible warning takes on its full meaning. 'For he that shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him the Son of man shall be ashamed when he shall come in his majesty and that of his

[1] *De virginibus*, I, vii, 37. P.L., 16, 199 B.
[2] *Osee*, 2, 16.
[3] *Loc. cit.*

Father and of the holy angels.' (St Luke, 9, 26.) If, on the other hand, the virgin is faithful, our Lord will be proud of her, and will glorify her in himself. We think of the words heard by St Teresa of Avila, 'Thy honour shall be mine, my honour shall be thine': or perhaps even more fervently of the divine melody haunting the soul of St Catharine of Bologna, 'His glory shall be seen in you.' Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity wanted to 'cover him with glory.' Is not the woman 'the glory of the man'? (I Corinthians, 11, 7.) 'O virgin, spouse of Christ,' cries St Gregory of Nazianza, 'give at all times glory to your husband.'[1] This is why the consecrated virgin, like the priest, is bound by vow to divine praise; it is her 'office'. 'Let the praise of God never leave your lips', is St Ambrose's recommendation.

It would be another falsification to consider only what the Christian virgin gives rather than what she receives. Our Lord is infinitely more faithful to his promise than she can be. 'For I know whom I have believed,' she says with St Paul, 'and I am certain that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him.' (2 Timothy, 1, 12.) Reception into a religious life by the Church that has been given the power of binding and loosing is a guarantee of the divine promise, indeed, but the promise is a certainty for every soul who responds, if only in her secret heart, to the divine call, and who is bound secretly by a personal engagement. Our Lord asks nothing without first giving it, nor without willing to bring it to perfection. The promise pours on the consecrated soul unceasing generosity, untroubled joy, unwavering trust. She hears addressed to herself the words God spoke through Isaiah's mouth: 'Can a woman forget her infant, so as not to have pity

[1] Moral Poems, 3. P.G., 37, 632 A.

on the son of her womb? And if she should forget, yet will not I forget thee: Behold, I have graven thee in my hands: thy walls are always before my eyes.'[1] Thy walls; whatever protects your life and your interests. Thy walls; without them, you would be exposed to attacks, surprises, to plundering by all your enemies. In the words of Scripture, the Christian virgin 'cometh up from the desert leaning upon her beloved.'[2]

To wed Christ means also to consecrate body and heart to him, to belong to him by living only to please him, to make him the object of tenderness and consideration. It is not, indeed, of the same order or on the same level as human love, but all the wealth of affection and devotion left free in celibacy can concentrate on the great supernatural love which has become the sole aim in life.

In this way, the Espousals of a virgin, enacted from the earliest years of the Church so that they constitute a real element of the Christian community, prepare the soul for this higher and more personal union, for the spiritual marriage where God's beloved feels the immensity of Divine Love; having become 'pure spirit and a single love with him', she loves him in the divine way. Since the Annunciation, the Holy Ghost has stooped down to the Christian virgin in order to love in her.

This makes it clear why the Church, as depository of our Lord's purposes and 'jealous for souls with God's own jealousy' attaches so much importance to virginity. 'In them,' said St Cyprian, 'blossoms the glorious fertility of our Holy Mother the Church, and as the

[1] Isaias, 49, 15, 16.
[2] Canticle, 8, 5.

number of virgins increases, so the joy of our Mother grows.'[1]

The Church carries respect so far that she sees in virginity the most perfect fulfilment of her own mystery: to be the beloved Bride of Christ; in the service for the consecration of virgins occur expressions such as, 'Virginity fulfils what marriage merely signifies.'[2] The respect is also manifested as tender concern. Saint Cyprian confesses to this anxiety. 'To you, O virgins, we address our words. The greater your glory, the greater is our care for you.'[3] The Church, above all, becomes maternal prayer full of burning entreaty and tenderness. 'Let their dread be only a loving dread, and their service full of love. Be their only honour, their only joy, their consolation in sadness, their counsel in doubt, their defence against offence, their patience in tribulation, their wealth in poverty, their nourishment during fasts, their remedy in sickness. Let them have all in thee, in thee whom they desire to love above all things.'[4]

This language shows how exactly the Christian virgin must live as wedded to Christ; 'My beloved to me, and I to him.'[5] Her life will be inwardly altered, for 'Without doubt, from the embrace of Christ, she receives the seed of his word,' says Origen.[6] 'Blessed is the fertility that results from this union of the soul with God's Word and from their mutual embrace. A noble offspring is born of it, modesty, justice, patience, sweetness and charity, followed by the sacred train of all the virtues.'

[1] *De habitu virginum*, III. P.L., 4, 443 B.
[2] Preface to the Consecration of Virgins.
[3] *De habitu virginum*, III. P.L., 4, 443 A.
[4] Preface of the Consecration of Virgins. Roman Pontifical.
[5] Canticle, 2, 16.
[6] *In Num. hom.*, 20. P.G., 12, 728 C.

It would be vain to pretend to be united to Christ without this complete conversion, or at least this fertilizing of every effort to fulfil God's expectations.

This is not all. Every step of personal progress results in the Church's increase, every inward enrichment extends to her life. Such union must be fertile. For it must bring spiritual motherhood. 'To be, by my union with thee, mother of souls', is the wonderful cry that escaped from little Thérèse. This brings us to the study of the fertility of Christian virginity, the most beautiful symbol of the Church's own motherhood. St Ambrose says it thus:

'Thus Holy Church, without pollution in her union, fertile in her childbirth, is virgin in purity, mother in fertility. Virgin, she bears us, not through the agency of man, but by the Spirit. She brings us to birth, not in bodily suffering but with angelic joy. Virgin, she nourishes us not with bodily milk, but with that with which the apostle suckles a growing people still at a tender age. What married woman has more children than the Church who is virgin?'[1]

[1] De virginitate, I, 6, 31. P.L., 16, 197 C.

CHAPTER IV

SPIRITUAL FERTILITY

IN the world of grace, fertility is a spiritual privilege. He by whom came grace and truth (John, I, 17.) was born of a Virgin, in order, says St Augustine somewhere, to make it understood 'by this stupendous miracle that the members of his body must be born from the Church, their virginal Mother.'[1]

The blessedness of those 'who hear the word of God and keep it' (Luke, 11, 28) must be understood in its fullness. It surpasses the joys of fertility given by the loftiest maternity. They are the brothers, the sisters, and the mother of our Lord.

Christian motherhood is so lofty because it is not only the giving of life, but also the childing of a soul by the communication of faith. The privileged position of virginity in this mission appears at once. This is the sense in which Christian celibacy has been described as a 'superfamilial vocation'. Père Camelot sums up St Gregory of Nyssa's thought in these words, 'The virgin soul conceives the Word and gives it to the world.'[2]

In return for renouncing the goods of love and a family on the human plane, the disciple of Christ receives 'wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart as the sand that is on the sea-shore.'[3] It would be no union unless it filled the mind

[1] *De sancta virginitate*, VI, 6. P.L., 40, 399.
[2] *Virgines Christi*, p. 8.
[3] 3 Kings, 4, 29.

and heart with Christ's own love. The quality of a great human love is to become living in the beloved, to be as if re-created in him and to ask how it was possible to live before meeting him. To an infinitely greater degree must the virgin's love be 'solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord; how it may please God' (I Corinthians, 7, 32), although her love is of a different order, containing more difficulty as it contains more truth and as it deals with spiritual fulfilment. Virginal love ought to fit St Paul's description of his favourite disciple, 'I have no man so of the same mind, who with sincere affection is solicitous for you. For all seek the things that are their own, not the things that are Jesus Christ's.' (Philippians, 2, 20, 21.)

Union with Christ is impossible without learning to love his Church as he loved it 'and delivered himself up for it' (Ephesians, 5, 25) and without feeling 'this burden I carry every day, my anxious care for all the churches', as the Apostle put it.

Those who are inclined nowadays to belittle Christian virginity should consider the fact that almost the whole of the Church's mission is entrusted to it, whether through the priesthood, through charitable works either for the sick or for education, or through the apostolic undertakings. What is hidden is God's secret, but the contemplative life of the enclosed speaks for itself. There is a ready reason. Celibacy puts people at the disposal of its varied activities. St Francis de Sales remarked on this aspect with delightful mischief. When he was in Chablais on one of his missions, he was buttonholed by an old Calvinist woman who was kept outside the Church solely by the celibacy of the priesthood. She was harping on it obstinately, harassing the the young missionary until at last, worn out, he said,

'But, my good woman, do you think that if I had a wife and children I should be able to spend so much time in listening to you?' The obvious truth of this argument gave it the good fortune of carrying conviction.

To be limited to this aspect, which might be called the professional one, would, however, be to gain a feeble idea of the Church's life. In fact, the Church lives by charity more than our lungs live by oxygen. There is no other, there could be no other function of the Church, nor any other way of executing her mission. The Church is made for charity, she is grounded in charity, she lives by it; she increases in charity. Here is the essential link between virginity and charity, making its true fertility within the Church. Without it, she would become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal, serving no purpose.

The words of St John of the Cross cannot be too often quoted: 'A little of such love serves better the glory of God and the utility of the Church, it serves better the interests of the soul, even though it correspond to a seeming idleness, than all works put together.' Virginity, if it is faithful to its purpose, which is to love, does the work of the heart in the mystical body. This is the essential, but by that very fact, it is common to every Christian vocation in whatever state of life. 'He does most who loves most.' The exclusive properties of virginity are what distinguish: we must distinguish.

First of all, by its presence, its very existence, it is a witness, the witness of the Spirit. It is a proof that Christ is living and that he is God. Who else dared to proclaim the possibility of virginity and make it a life not only possible but blessed for millions of human beings? Although often quoted, Montalembert's phrase

in his preface to *Monks of the West* is still pertinent, 'Who is this invisible lover who died on a gallows eighteen hundred years ago, yet who draws to him youth, beauty, love? It is not a man, it is a God.' Père Lacordaire, at the same period, developed a similar argument in his *conférences de Notre-Dame*. Long ago, the Fathers of the Church felt its truth, and St Athanasius did not scruple to proclaim the existence of virginity as one proof of the true religion:

'The Son of God, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, made man for us, he who destroyed death and liberated our race from slavery and corruption, granted us this blessing on top of all the others; he gave it to us to have on earth an image of the angels, that is to say, virginity. The Catholic Church has adopted the custom of calling those who possess this virtue the brides of Christ; when pagans see them, they admire them as temples of the Logos. It is certain, indeed, that this venerable and celestial condition is honoured nowhere but amongst us. This is one of the great proofs that we have the true religion.'[1]

This argument of apologetics has two facets. On the one hand, it agrees with the testimony of the mystics and their experience that Christ is Lord and has with his own a relation of Person to person; an experience so distinct that it makes people surrender the whole of life that it illuminates and transforms. This distinctness does not occur in all vocations, it is true, but it is not uncommon. Again, the successfulness of a superhuman undertaking is proof of direct intervention by God. It is a manifestation of that 'power of God' that the Sadducees failed to take into account in their objections to the future life.

It is not part of my scheme to insist on this apologetic

[1] St Athanasius, Apology :o Constantius. P.G., 25 640 A.

side, that is to say, the side which is outward and visible, but it is possible to state that all arguments of this kind are rooted in something essential, and that they show the vitality of the Church. Does the fact that to-day we have acquired knowledge of continence in Hinduism lessen the force of the argument? The question did not even arise for St Athanasius in considering the existence of the Pythagoreans. Did he look on them simply as exceptions? Were there authentic cases in his time?

A few observations are to the point. Firstly, the great Hindu endeavour is unquestionably a homage to chastity, which it envisages as the supreme victory over the hostile forces of the world. They go so far as to look upon the entirely chaste ascetic as freed from all human misery, finally protected against the attacks of wild animals and against poison. But this form of chastity is sought for as a personal or cosmic balance. It is, furthermore, the result of meticulous endeavour and methodical training, which, it appears, cause it to remain the exception.

The reverse is true of Christianity, where it is a widely accorded gift, sought above all by supernatural means and received as a grace. It is considered, beyond all else, a love-offering to Christ. It is because of this that it has value as testimony. It gladdens a Catholic's heart to see this value carefully preserved by his Orthodox brethren, and rediscovered by Protestantism, where some small communities have been founded in this spirit.

The Fathers were not lacking in this respect. Virginity appeared to them as an anticipation of the world to come where they 'shall be as the angels of God in heaven.' (Matthew, 22, 30.) Let us hear the voice of St Ambrose:

'Let no one be astounded that those who are united to the Lord of angels are themselves called angels. Who would deny that it has come down from heaven, this form of life hardly found on earth before God descended into a mortal body. Then, a virgin conceived in her womb and the Word was made flesh, so that flesh might become God. . . . After the Lord had come into the body . . . then over all the earth was spread this heavenly way of living.'[1]

Christ's resurrection ushered in this new world. He rose again, 'first-fruits of the dead', and he shared with us his glorious state. 'But our conversation is in heaven: from whence also we look for the saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ, who will reform the body of our lowness, made like to the body of his glory.' (Phil., 3, 20-21.)

It is natural that the Church on earth should adumbrate eternity in its ways, and that lives should be truly modelled on this reality. The new quality of life that makes existence like the risen Christ, a living for God, shines out in virginity as one of its brightest splendours.

In the wonderful preface for the consecration of virgins, the Church places herself and us with her in this expectation. Let us once more meditate the words:

'Holy Lord, omnipotent Father, eternal God, benevolent guest in chaste hearts, God the lover of unblemished souls, thou who, through thy Word by which all things were created, restorest human nature, which was corrupted in our first parents by the guile of the devil, so that not only dost thou recall it to the innocence of its first origin but leadest it further to experience the eternal blessings which it shall possess in the world to come, and who raisest to the likeness of angels those who are still chained to a mortal state. . . .'

Such views might easily seem far-fetched or unreal. In an age when people tend to identify the Kingdom

[1] *De virginibus*, I, 3, 11. P.L., 16, 191 C.

of God with the progress of humanity, there is little encouragement to pay attention to these loftily spiritual ideas. Yet, is it necessary to lose the riches and the sense of the Kingdom, as they haunted the great Christian thinkers, simply because we have discovered that some part of them can be applied temporally? Happy the disciple who can keep hold of the eternal realities while adding to them the discoveries of his age.

Cardinal Suhard wrote in his last Pastoral Letter:

> 'There is but one force in the world capable of conquering love, and that is another love, a stronger love. By renouncing human tenderness, the priest gives to souls, as long as they are unblinded by prejudice, and even to the others in the long run, the proof of an unrivalled discovery, of a final happiness possible and found. My God and my all.'[1]

In a world athirst for egoistic enjoyment, virginity gives the great testimony to the primacy of spiritual goods and above all, if it be said without sacrilege, of the all-sufficiency of God. It cries aloud that God is so near and so great that, in spite of all the gloom of our age, still all can be sacrificed for union with him. 'I have loved him more than beauty or health . . .': thus, in radiant joy, she describes 'his virtues, who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.' (I Peter, 2, 9.)

Virginity also gives testimony, paradoxical if interpreted superficially, of the worth of the flesh and the grandeur of marriage. When, after Constantine's edict, the Church burst forth from the catacombs ablaze with life, there were people who reproached her with depopulating the world by the number of her virgins. In an age plagued with Malthusianism as ours is, such a reproach would hardly stand, but the answer made

[1] Cardinal Suhard, *Le prêtre dans la cité*.

in that early time remains valid now, perhaps even more valid than it was in the Fourth Century.

The great defenders of virginity were content to refute the charge by pointing out that nowhere were marriages more fertile or families more stable and numerous than in the Christian communities where virginity flourished. St Ambrose expresses it thus: 'If therefore anyone should think that the human race is diminished by the consecration of virgins, let him consider this: where there are few virgins, there also are few men; where there are most virgins, there also the number of men is greater.'[1] St Justin, already, in the second century, seems to have presaged this correspondence. In place of sterile, egoistic debauchery, man sees the realities of the flesh with new eyes; he sees them harnessed to the spirit, and respect for virginity restores his respect for marriage. The one goes hand in hand with the other. 'Formerly, we took pleasure in debauchery, now we embrace only chastity. If we marry, it is only that we may bring up children; and if we renounce marriage, we keep entire continence.'[2]

In our days when 'the vile multitude goes, under the lash of pleasure, the merciless tormentor, to pluck remorse in a slave's holiday' (Baudelaire), the existence of virginity proclaims both the independence of the spirit from the needs of the flesh, and the magnificent part the flesh has to play in the service of creative love against the servitude of egoistical sensuality.

A lofty doctrine of marriage cannot exist without an understanding of the importance of virginity. On the level of ordinary life, however, there must also be devotion, for married couples in our day have to

[1] *De virginitate*. VII, 36. P.L., 16, 275 B.
[2] *Apol.*, I, 14, 29. P.G., 6, 348 B and 373 A.

contend not only against instinct, which they can be helped to control by the example of continence, but also against material burdens that can become joys only through devotedness. People who are slaves to their passions are often very much impressed by this double witness, which, therefore, gives virginity an apostolic value. St Dominic, solicitous all his life for an effective apostolate, put virginity first among his injunctions as he counselled his children on his deathbed: 'The mercy of God has preserved to this day my flesh pure, and my virginity without blemish; if you desire the same grace, avoid all questionable intercourse. That is the protection that renders the servant pleasing to Christ and gives him glory and credit before the people.'[1] Long before, the Apostle *par excellence* had asserted that purity was one of the qualities necessary to a minister of God,[2] and he recommended the same purity to his most dear son, to him who was most at one with him in soul: 'Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the faithful in word, in conversation, in charity, in faith, in chastity.' (I Timothy 4, 12.) A little further on, Paul, counselling the respect and affection that ought to be at the centre of every apostolic relationship, did not swerve from the same preoccupation. 'Entreat . . . old women, as mothers: young women, as sisters, in all chastity.' (I Timothy, 5, 2.)

Tertullian sees purity as that which glorifies Christ in our bodies, so that he calls it the reflection of Christ and, as it were, the expression of him.

The apostle's counsel suggests both distance and nearness at the same time: Christ's demands separate

[1] Père Lacordaire, *Vie de saint Dominique*, de Gigord, 1912.

[2] 2 Corinthians, 6, 6.

irrevocably on the physical plane, but they draw closer souls quickened by the same blood. We are led to the very centre of this mysterious Christian fertility, the power of mutual self-revelation, and the presence of God. The hindu, renouncing all carnal gratification, testifies to the spirit when he declares that the quest for the absolute is worthy of total sacrifice, but, unless the spirit filters into his efforts unawares, it is still himself that he is seeking in his annihilation in the Whole. Christian virginity, on the contrary, although it is in fact seeking the same presence, seeks first of all to surrender to God and to all that is near God: 'He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord.' (I Corinthians, 7, 32.) The great affair on the Lord's behalf is surely to love and to spread love.

A careful scrutiny of the ideal of virginity is necesary because such stress has been laid on caricatures of old maids with withered hearts, with devotion without self-sacrifice, and with obsessed minds. In the light of such a scrutiny, true virginity is revealed as not only capable of love, but actually the only real source of love. Motherhood unfolds only in proportion to its virginal reserve. The maternal instinct possesses the magnificence of being prisoner of what is weakest, of the deepest affliction, of the most urgent need, but it can be fulfilled only in giving without expectation of return; a woman must give up her son to make him fully man. No one is fully mother, with the motherhood that creates personality, except by virginity and by divesting herself: and this is true not only of motherly love, but of all love. Renunciation, refusing, or, in the case of marriage, spiritualising all sensual exchanges, gives a wonderful harvest at the spiritual level. 'Impure

love makes man hunger, for it lives on greed; pure love nourishes man, for it lives on giving itself.'[1] The nostalgic words of the poet are truer than is supposed: 'You alone can love, mysterious monks.'

Why is this? The real reason, the only one, is the affinity between virginity and charity, a kinship whose closeness in each particular case is gauged only by God. The road is a good one, yes, but to know how each person treads it is also needful. We can only make a general statement of the privileges hoped for by human beings from virginal love, privileges that will render this love wonderfully flexible to the unfolding and the promptings of divine charity working towards our neighbour.

The first of these privileges is entirety. Nothing so narrows a heart as impurity becomes the rule of life, and the scale of values. This is egoism in its vilest form. Man falls below the beasts when his intelligence makes him the servant of the lowest instincts.

Chastity and the grace of the sacrament bestow on man the power of becoming spirit even in his flesh. 'This is a great sacrament!' There is no need to insist on the point, but contemplation of what is 'better' must not lead to depreciation of what is 'good'. Yet whoever is in the bonds of marriage becomes divided, 'pulled about', and is therefore limited. The affections are restricted, rooted in the most intimate part of the soul and the body, ties are limitations, duties are often crushing, and anxiety is harrowing even when these are lived on the level of the divine plan. Virginity, on the contrary, gets rid of duties and limitations and sets all tenderness and all the heart's energies at the disposal of the Spirit. Thus it attains to universality.

[1] G. Thibon, *What God has Joined.*

All forms of nobility play their part in this privilege. Queen Astrid defined the womanly role in royalty thus: 'A queen is a mamma with children, but she is also Mamma for all the children in her country.' This royal saying is a commentary on the heroic gesture of so many working mammas who actually take over the care of their dying neighbour's children. . . . Grace is the true nobility, and no vocation is cut off from its benefits. Yet, virginity, deliberately shifting the centre of gravity of life and of the affections to the spiritual sphere, gives them a divine orientation. Every child becomes the child of whoever has renounced having children of her own; the Lord's preferences and his affairs become the aim in life for those who, for his sake, have renounced their own life and their home. The styles of 'Sister' and 'Mother' universally accorded to nuns would make this clear if they had not become commonplaces from long custom. Simone Weil, who felt so strongly to how great an extent anyone and everyone ought to become the object of a disciple's consideration and love, understood that for this, a universal sensitiveness must develop, a quality contradictory and miraculous. Virginity, lived in its ideal perfection, makes this miracle natural. It is not by chance that there has been always a link between it and the undertakings of Christian charity.

An ambiguity must be avoided here. 'Universal' can mean abstract and unreal. To love the whole world in this way might mean to cease loving anyone. Please God, no! Virginity is ready to see the personal side of all beings just because it is detached from all solicitude on its own account. In each nameless person whom it tends namelessly, it is not the person himself it loves. To see in every nameless one the soul, as it

was called in old-fashioned language, the individual in the language of to-day, him who bears a name, has a unique appearance and is in an incommunicable relationship with God. Even if the first comer had had the misfortune of becoming a thing, the maternal concern of virginity would create it anew, and restore him his soul.

The more a man is governed by his instincts, particularly the sexual impulse, the more will he see in another merely externals and their bearing on himself. Virginity, on the contrary, enables regard to pierce through to the inward personality, given to it to love and serve. Balzac, with his profound psychological insight, perceived the unique quality of this love springing in a heart emptied of all human affection. He found for it the happy phrase 'apostolic tenderness':

> 'If there be a stage in suffering when modesty dies, there is also, I know it, a stage in moral suffering when spiritual energy disappears. Mme de Graslin was surprised to find this refinement of observation and this tender pitifulness in M. Bonnet; the exquisite delicacy of this man never deteriorated by passion, gave him a woman's maternal sense of the sorrows of his flock. This *mens divinitior*, this apostolic tenderness, sets the priest above other men, making him a divine being. Mme de Graslin had not yet associated with M. Bonnet enough to discover this beauty hidden in his soul like a well whence flow grace, freshness and true life.'[1]

It is tenderness because it absorbs the depths of the whole being, but it is apostolic because it looks into the depths of the object of its love. 'Tenderness' expresses the reality of the affection, while 'apostolic' expresses its light and its ideal. From these comes the incomparable fertility in the bringing of souls to birth.

What, then, is needful for the birth of a soul? Much

[1] H. de Balzac, *Le curé de village*.

love and much light! Much love, disinterested enough to make a soul alive to itself, but love exacting and sweeping, revealing to a soul the best of itself and drawing it upwards. What could a soul make of a cold love that would never touch it, of a faint-hearted love shut in its own self, of a love without God that would leave it to its own devices? Much light, not abstract formulas, but life enlightening itself, enlightening destiny, enlightening the love that has created and will fulfil it.

All Christians have been entrusted with this love, but especially those who have given up all human aims in life so that they may grow to love as Christ has loved them. Thus, they have become 'witness of the friendly presence of God in the world.' (Père de Grandmaison.)

PART II

Difficulties of Virginity

Chapter V

LIGHT AND SHADOW

WE know, when we reflect on the goods given to virginity in relation to the faith, that we are face to face with people privileged through a gift of God, people who are revealed in an unparalleled brightness of eternal glory, 'purchased from among men, the first fruits to God and to the Lamb.' (Apocalypse, 14, 4).

The cinema, current conversation, modern novels give an opposite impression. They all show celibates as a world of disgraced people, either objects of pity or a butt for public contempt and irony. When the function of hormones is discovered, celibates are accused of being unbalanced. When psychology and the sexual instinct are explored, celibates are called repressed. If the family is exalted, celibates are represented as egoists. And so on.

Why this violent contrast? The real answer is always the words of the Gospel. 'If the world hate you, know ye that it hath hated me before you. If you had been of the world, the world would love its own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.' (St John, 15, 18,19.) Virginity is, as a matter of course, in radical opposition to a pleasure-ruled world which places material goods first.

Our life on earth is, nevertheless, such a mixture of light and shade that it is as well to acknowledge that

this misapprehension cannot be so simply defined. Even many Catholic authors betray through some of their characters a sympathy with the scoffers.

Celibacy is as ambiguous as every human reality. It can as well be preferred for the sake of an ideal as undergone as a painful necessity. In the first case, it is a choice with the freedom, joy and generosity of a willing aspiration, even though it may not be realised in its fullness. In the second case, it is an affliction, a piece of bad luck, a source of regret, melancholy in proportion to the painfulness or injustice of what has caused it. Even then, great and fine use could be made of it. The particular way of entering celibacy does not prejudice intelligence, feeling, devotion or supernatural life, or even psychological conditions. Some unconsciously take back what they have given or unknowingly regret what they have chosen, while others succeed in living generously and nobly a state that they still secretly regret.

Christian virginity, furthermore, because it is chosen and promised, is a lofty ideal and therefore its lapses are darker because they fall more starkly across the white light of grace. They are also more disappointing because they cheat an unavowed expectation of what is best in the human soul. They appear more ridiculous because of the disproportion between the pretention and the reality. Sometimes reproaches and scoffing represent homage to the ideal. No one takes any notice of children throwing mud at the end of the school day, but everybody at court was surprised to hear the small King of Rome asking for some lovely mud, when he was worn out with luxury, protocol and pomp. Nothing is more natural than to see vegetables piled on a lorry, but it would be comic to see them loaded on a racing

car or a limousine! If feminine virginity does not really embody union with Christ so that he becomes its head, it will simply throw into relief every feminine defect by the very absence of the natural complement.

To take examples, celibacy is intended for self-giving and rising above self, but if it ceases to be busy about the Lord's affairs, it easily turns to egoism and meanness. It is made for laying the heart open for the entrance of charity; if it shuts up, hardening and dryness will result. It is made for detaching the human being from material preoccupations; but if it does not begin at a level above them, it ends in obsession and repression. Feminine virginity, designed to bring woman to fulfilment in the most beautiful way possible by betrothing her to Christ, runs the risk , if it is not lived at this high level, of developing and exaggerating all feminine defects through the lack of the normal masculine complement. Meanness, primness, touchiness, narrowness, instability, sentimentality, these are only the beginning of a formidable list.

To admit this does not put the detractors of virginity in the right; it is merely to realise that the goods of celibacy do not follow automatically from the resolution to undertake it. Celibacy is a path towards a goal, but a path is made to lead people forwards, not to camp on. Nothing is completed on earth, nor is anything finally brought to success. 'Time is your ship, and not your dwelling-place.'

If we take the trouble to make an objective scrutiny, are we sure that celibacy is the cause of all the evils attributed to it? Has it a monopoly of bitter minds, of people with sexual obsessions, of paltry hyper-sensitiveness, to the extent of becoming a dividing line between two types of character? If it were possible to draw up

statistics of families disrupted, or merely set at variance, by adultery and divorce, of mothers whose love is distorted by possessiveness, of jealous and quarrelsome wives, can we be sure that the resulting picture would present conclusive condemnation of the misdeeds of Christian celibacy? The Old Testament, which was still ignorant of the virginal vocation, had some reflections to make about women, and I gladly offer them for the consideration of those who cheerfully throw all the faults of their sex on old maids and their celibate state. If 'a prudent wife is properly from the Lord' (Prov. 19, 14), that is to say a gift of infinite price, if there is lyrical praise of a virtuous woman, introduced, incidentally, by the question 'Who shall find her?' (Prov. 31, 10), there is a whole series of proverbs full of vivid descriptions of the disagreeableness of feminine quarrels and follies:

It is better to sit in a corner of the housetop, than with a brawling woman and in a common house (Prov. 21, 9). Roofs dropping through in a cold day and a contentious woman are alike (Prov. 27, 15). It is better to dwell in the wilderness than with a quarrelsome and passionate woman (Prov. 21, 19). One man among a thousand I have found: a woman among them all I have not found (Eccl. 7, 28).

'Any plague but the plague of the heart: and any wickedness, but the wickedness of a woman: . . . There is no head worse than the head of a serpent: and there is no anger above the anger of a woman. It will be more agreeable to abide with a lion and a dragon, than to dwell with a wicked woman. The wickedness of a woman changeth her face: and she darkeneth her countenance as a bear, and sheweth it like sackcloth. In the midst of her neighbours, her husband groaned, and hearing he sighed a little. All malice is short to the malice of a woman: let the lot of sinners fall upon her. As the climbing of a sandy way is to the feet of the aged, so is a wife full of tongue to a quiet man. . . . Give no issue to thy water, no, not a little: nor to a wicked woman liberty to gad abroad.' (Ecclesiasticus, 25, 18–19, 22–7, 34.)

What conclusion can we draw? These stinging words against woman do not answer the question we asked at the beginning. What they do show is that it would be actually dishonest to attack only the unmarried. 'The more holy a woman is, the more she is womanly.' (L. Bloy.)

Since virginity is something supernatural, it cannot be said too often that it can be fulfilled only on a plane above nature. It is a path, good only if travelled in a spirit of progress towards the supreme goal of Charity, a mountain-top whose summit is not easily reached. 'The way to be traversed towards glory is rough and hilly.' Courage is needed to follow it, and the courage required of virgins is almost equal to that required of martyrs. 'The summit is not reached without rugged effort.'[1] St Cyprian's sober words emphasize the difficulties of trying to fulfil the divine ideal. Unceasingly, the Church asserts that it is a gift of God to be sought for by prayer. Equally she condemns those who have doubts of receiving it through prayer. 'God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able: but will make also with temptation issue, that you may be able to bear it.' (I Corinthians, 10, 13.)[2]

[1] *De habitu virginum*, 21. P.L., 4, 460 A, 461 A.

[2] The Council of Trent, *Of Marriage*, Can. 9, Denz. 980.

CHAPTER VI

THE SPIRIT AGAINST THE FLESH

IF there is one thing of which the Christian is fairly warned, it is that the life of Christ cannot take root in him without a hard and unremitting struggle. This thought is one of the first to strike our attention when we open the earliest Christian books, above all St Paul's Epistles. The struggle against self is less distinctly drawn in the Old Testament. Is it because the demands of the New go much further, much deeper, and stand out with inescapable precision? Is it because the disciple, supported by a living ideal and trusting in present grace, has undertaken a more valorous battle? Is it because the battle itself will lead him 'to stretch his arms out to his deliverer'? Whatever the reason, the war and the threat to virtue are felt everywhere in St Paul's writings; but they lead to trust in Christ. Which of us is there who has not been moved to the bottom of his heart by the anguish of discovering his peril, and that his liberation lay with Christ?

It would be superficial to reduce all the apostle's warnings to the struggle for chastity, but equally it would be running counter to his clearest intentions not to see the place he gives these. In the Epistle to the Galatians, for instance, 'For the flesh lusteth against the spirit: and the spirit against the flesh. For these are contrary to one another: so that you do not the things of the world . . . now the works of the flesh are manifest. . . .' (Galatians, 5, 17, 19.)

All Christian moralists dwell on this subject persistently; we have already heard St Cyprian. Origen speaks no otherwise. Later, St Gregory of Nyssa, in his study of the life of Moses, makes the following reflection as he considers the dauntless and victorious warriors yielding to the seductions of pleasure: 'Among the many evils that lay siege to the heart of man, no passion is as strong as sensuality.'[1] St Augustine picks up the thread, adding a personal touch in the memory of his own struggles in a way that still moves us. The Fathers of the Desert hand down experience and practical teachings so firmly rooted in knowledge of human nature, and so freshly expressed, that they have never lost their application. Cassian brings the Fathers to life for us, revealing them as anxious to thwart all the enemy's wiles. St Cesarius, moulded at Lérins, echoed the same concern a little later when he said in one of his sermons, 'Of all Christian struggles, the only really hard ones are the struggles for chastity, for the battle is a daily one and victory is rare.'[2] The theme has been re-handled many and many a time, and if it is less attractive nowadays for fear of the negative method which reiterates 'don't', it persists under another guise, in the first rank of psychological study with all the ideas that Freudianism, more or less, has spread. It is unnecessary further to emphasize the reality of the struggle. Rather, it is useful to seek its causes for a precise understanding of the effort required.

First, there is the biological urge engraved in the very physiological nature of a human being, so deeply inherent in him that everything in his nature is modified by it; 'sexuate' is the modern jargon. The more

[1] Life of Moses, P.G., 44, 424 B.
[2] Sermon VI.

medical research discovers about the importance of hormones and glands, and the unity of the human compound, differentiated even in the initial chromosomes, the more should we be aware of the depth and all-embracingness of the sexual instinct. It will become impossible not to see the intensity of effort required of a soul desiring to spiritualize even her flesh, or to gloss over the rooted antagonism between flesh and spirit reiterated by St Paul.

Nevertheless, the mature adult resolved to live in continence is not faced with the instinct in its primal force. A purely biological side, or a purely organic side has no separate existence, for the whole is pervaded by psychic harmony. The heritage handed down so mysteriously from former generations, the individual temperament often bound up with the physical make-up, impressions retained in the subconscious since infancy, shocks sustained since the dawn of the age of reason, the more or less voluntary experimental blunders of adolescence, all these combine to condition a man's psychology to its foundation.

It is, further, hardly ever a problem of instinct in its purely biological state (genital, in technical language); it is part of a consciousness always bound up in affections. It is sexual certainly, but above all, it is human, linked to the personality, that of the lover as of the beloved. It enters the realm of imagination, with its delusions, perversions and obsessions. It enters the realm of the heart with its sudden raptures, vague aspirations, its irrevocable choice that cannot be shared, its forever unsatisfied ebbings and flowings.

The sexual problem concerns the whole man, for it arises from his organic structure, starting in his nervous system and reaching the summits of his soul.

The response must consequently be also a total one. This applies supremely to the virginal vocation, called to be 'purchased from among men, the firstfruits to God and to the Lamb.' (Apocalypse, 14, 4.) It is an affair of the soul, and of the entire soul for here more than anywhere else are we face to face with the 'great love in which the soul envelops the body,' as Nietzsche so admirably says. It would be vain to try to be chaste without taking account of the conditions of bodily life or to believe progress possible without taking account of the whole spiritual life. Doctors say that a complaint cannot be cured without general care of the health. Far less can the impulses of the flesh be resisted without the help of an intense spiritual life. Let us take stock of some of the essential aspects of the spiritual battle.

The most important thing to remember is the inward resolution. This must be guarded as the apple of the eye, for it is the very soul of virginity. As long as it is intact, no harm is done, but it is impossible to be too careful in its defence. Here the words of Jesus Christ apply decisively and ruthlessly:

> 'But I say to you that whosoever shall look on a woman to lust after her hath already committed adultery with her in his heart. And if thy right eye scandalize thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee. For it is expedient for thee that one of thy members should perish, rather than that thy whole body be cast into hell. And if thy right hand scandalize thee, cut it off and cast it from thee. For it is expedient for thee that one of thy members should perish rather than that thy whole body go into hell.' (St Matthew, 5, 28 ff.)

Half-measures that admit of argument, regrets that go so far as to call the decision back into question, compromises, all are poison and sometimes mortal, because they introduce the enemy into the vital centre. It was not

for this that the Master used the decisive comparison of a mutilation. Bossuet expressed it forcibly. 'In this matter, everything should be violent. Even the need for fighting should be avoided as far as possible, for people are not brave for long, nor resolute against themselves.'[1] All sin has a power as great as itself obscuring judgment. Each defection lessens the probity of the conscience, not necessarily the probity that gives the power of discriminating in theory between good and bad, but the remoteness and objectivity that enable a person to see clearly in his own case.

The Master's warning is a grave one. 'Amen, amen I say unto you that whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin.' (St John, 8, 34.) Sins against purity are rightly said not to be the most serious ones. Hardness of heart, injustice (particularly on the part of an employer), pride, indeed any sins committed directly against God are incomparably more serious. Sins against purity, too, are often accompanied by ugliness and shame that may arouse disgust to act as an antidote. Very great saints have sprung from them, the Magdalene, Augustine, Père de Foucauld. Yet they must not be minimized because, first, they are sin and all offences against God are infinitely serious, and, secondly, they are more intoxicating, more deeply instilled in the flesh, and are therefore more likely to cloud our judgment and blind us. Impurity, in its beginning, is not what most separates from God, but it is likely to be what ensnares a man most deeply in worldly pleasures.

These were the evils that inspired St Gregory of Nyssa's profound observation, 'Lust is a furious and cruel master; it drives on the soul that is enslaved to it

[1] *Meditations sur l'Evangile*, 15th day.

as if by whips.'[1] St Gregory the Great, in a subtle analysis sometimes difficult to follow but elucidated by St Thomas, shows us the dreary progeny of impurity. 'Blindness of spirit, inconsiderateness, precipitancy, inconstancy, self-love, hatred of God, attachment to this world and aversion from the life to come.'[2] This is the extreme case, probably rare, but something of these misdeeds occur in every sin of impurity committed really deliberately and consciously entertained. Such harmful possibilities, particularly when the rights of sacred love are at stake and the alternative is the sacrilegious shamefulness of taking back what has been given to God, surely justify insistence on violent, on uncompromising fidelity. Prudence, propriety, almost adroitness, will all have to be used according to the case, if the struggle is to be as absolute as the gift. Asceticism itself is indispensable under the sign of the cross, but the havoc wrought by asceticism that has come to be its own end instead of maintaining its relative place as a means, is rightly to be condemned.

We are 'always bearing about in our body the mortification of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our bodies too.' (2 Corinthians, 4, 10-11.) Yet this sharing in the death of Christ, this participation in his life, do not depend on the strictness of asceticism, but on its fittingness to every individual life. The majority of cases of sexual excess appear to arise nowadays not from an excess of vitality as was probably the case in the Middle Ages, but from morbid hypertrophy of impoverished personality. Christian asceticism will, accordingly, have to adopt quite different methods at arriving at the same ends, although

[1] Life of Moses.

[2] *Mor. Lib.*, 31, 45. P.L., 76, 621.—*Summa*, IIa-IIae, 153, 5.

pursuing the same goal and inspired by the same spirit. The inhuman pressure of modern life, with its rhythm so wearing to the nerves and its atmosphere so artificially stimulating to sensibility, can be counteracted only by a quite different kind of asceticism than that of centuries past. At all costs the nervous balance must be safeguarded by avoiding feverish activity, by ensuring sleep, by eschewing stimulants. In a word, the nervous system is continually menaced, and great care must be taken of it. The more delicate it is, the more wisdom will its owner need to deal with himself, and the more sensitive vigilance in finding out the exact personal conditions needed for fidelity to Christ.

What St Paul calls 'the jealousy of God' (2 Corinthians, 11, 2) needed for whatever concerns the inward world of the heart and the imagination, to guard it according to the spirit of the grand counsel of the Old Testament, 'With all watchfulness keep thy heart, because life issueth out from it.' (Prov. 4, 23.) The divine words are plain enough; we need not linger over them. Yet, do they not suggest, in reference to God, one of the best of battle tactics? Instead of violently resisting temptation by a harsh repression of all feeling, it is nearly always wiser to rise above it, to soar towards God by an act of faith and love, to remain in his presence peacefully and openheartedly, more busy to please him and to yield to him than to crush the enemy with fury. Ruthless obsessions of purity and timorous consciences are accessaries more often than one might think. The words of Scripture can be repeated, 'But a net is spread in vain before the eyes of them that have wings.' (Prov. I, 17.) Finally, simplicity that looks at things as they are, peace that does not become disturbed, resolution which admits of no discussion, these

are so many inward tendencies that enable the soul to keep all its energies in control, directed towards the goal. Direction towards the goal. This is what is important, even when the soul is faced with the greatest difficulties, with a temperament, perhaps, that becomes unbalanced at certain times, with passions let loose, or with urgent pressure from without. Through all these trials, virginity well knows that it lives only to please the Lord and to grow to love him more every day. Then she hears the mysterious words that comforted the apostle when he was exposed to the rebuffs of Satan and wounded by the sting of the flesh, 'My grace is sufficient for thee.' (2 Corinthians, 12, 9.) His grace, that is to say his all-powerful love close at hand, watchful and faithful. How could the Lord fail to protect whoever expects to be protected by him 'as the apple of thy eye' (Psalms, 16, 8), precious to his love in spite of his frailty. This is why virginity requires immoveable resolution always, and delicate prudence—other names for faithful love. 'This perfect purity in celibacy and chastity,' explains Origen, 'this precious gift of God, God lavishes them to those who ask him from the bottom of their souls, with faith and ceaseless prayers.'[1]

[1] P.G., 13, 1252 B.

THE WORLD'S HOSTILITY

THE greatest difficulty, even the only one, is in ourselves. In this realm, as in all others, nothing can sully man unless it comes from his heart. The impulses of instinct, external pressure, even violation or rape, none of these can achieve anything without the consent of the will. Yet this internal conflict of the flesh against the spirit would be incomparably less hard without the external allies that the flesh find all round it. St Paul warned Christians of this. 'Put you on the armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the deceits of the devil. For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood: but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places. Therefore take unto you the armour of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day and to stand in all things perfect.' (Ephesians, 6, 11-13.)

Undoubtedly, the apostle meant us to understand explicitly that the Christian conflict cannot be confined to struggles against the flesh. He reminds us that in the struggle itself, the Christian has to face an invisible enemy and a kind of spiritual contagion. It would be childish to ascribe all temptations to extraordinary intervention such as occurred in the lives of the Desert Fathers, or, nearer our time, in the life of St Catherine of Siena. The horrifying narrative comes to mind in which Blessed Raymond of Capua described the

diabolical onslaughts that the saint had to repel. . . .

It is more usual for this external activity to consist of the combination of current opinions hostile to the Gospels, of more or less underhand propaganda against virtue, of occasions of sin, even of crying scandals; in a word, all that the Gospel names 'the world' and that Christ cursed with a terrible curse when he excluded it from his prayer. 'I pray not for the world . . .' (St John, 17, 9.). It is true that this "world" extends far beyond the realm of impurity, but impurity looms large in it to our eyes, which are struck most by what can be most easily perceived. It is this aspect of the problem of the world that concerns us here.

On the subject of virginity, the world will be by turns sceptical, mocking, scornful, and will try to corrupt it. Always it is radically opposed to it. It gives irrefutable denial of worldly principles and is a living reproach to worldly attitudes. The words Wisdom puts in the mouth of the godless are still profoundly applicable: 'Let us therefore lie in wait for the just, because he is not for our turn, and he is contrary to our doings . . .' 'He is become a censurer of our thoughts. He is grievous unto us, even to behold; for his life is not like other men's, and his ways are very different.' (Wisdom, 2, 12, 14, 15.)

The influence of the world sets first, perhaps, about establishing the belief that sin is normal, and by such a presumption, it weakens the resistance of conscience. There is a painful interest to be derived, here, from studying the development of certain words in current usage. In Christian periods, there was no term in Basque to express 'adultery'; infidelity seemed unthinkable and inexpressible. If, in the classical language of the French Seventeenth Century, the expressions

'amant' and 'amante' ("lover" for both man and woman) still kept an honourable sense, soon afterwards there was no longer any way of expressing an honourable friendship, for the words 'ami' and 'amie' had already too often developed a meaning full of sin. The world acts also through propaganda, putting art and intelligence at the service of the lowest instincts, not to beautify and give life to them by the loveliness of the spirit, but to degrade and reduce them to the level of commercial interests.

Profound discoveries can be made in considering the alliance between money and the most degraded instincts. Money lends itself to serve them so as to use them for its own ends; for its own increase; money becomes its own rule and its own end, subjecting all things to its dominion, and serving what is most corrupt to accomplish this; money is like an incarnation of the devil, 'the servant of the servants of themselves' as Valéry says. So, in our hyper-nervous, hyper-sensitive, hypersexual civilization, 'the dreary boredom of sex has replaced the joyous variety of love' (Jean Guitton). This disorder occurs at every level, the level of the intelligence where some have tried to justify the vilest perversions, down to the level of obscene pictures; the easiest, since it needs no genius, and the most insidious, since it appeals to the sense. There is no need to analyse the influence of magazines and films. To imagine that this display could end by deadening the senses would be ignorance of the inexhaustible pliancy of the flesh when subjugated to perverted mind and to the impressionability of puerile imagination. Such surroundings render one who dwells in them inflammable to the smallest spark as if he were a piece of clothing soaked in petrol.

The only way in which the Christian conscience can keep steadfast when breathing such infected air, the only way that resolution, which is the essence of virginity, can remain unshaken, is for a Christian to seek refuge in the divine prayer: 'I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou should'st keep them from evil. They are not of the world, as I also am not of the world.' (John, 17, 15-16.) What our Lord adds reveals the inward atmosphere that his disciples must inhabit if they are to keep themselves from evil. 'Sanctify them in truth. Thy word is truth.' (John, 17, 17.)

Here we should mention the help of the angels, who are charged to carry in their hands those whose help is in God: 'It is not surprising,' said St Ambrose, 'that the angels fight for you who fight to live the life of angels. Virginal chastity is worthy of their protection since she merits their life.'[1]

This 'holiness through truth', is it not the same thing that St Paul recommends when he desires for Christians in their spiritual combats, to have their loins girt about with truth to maintain them strong and upright?

Truth, which is God's word, shows the disciple first that he is not fighting alone. He hears, as the apostle does, the liberating words 'My grace is sufficient for thee.' How could it be otherwise, since grace is the victorious strength of God and the divinizing presence of his love? Grace is him in us and we in him.

The disciple learns from this truth that it is worth taking infinite trouble to rise above all things for the sake of these immeasurable goods, however much our present state hides their splendour and value. The earthen vessel hides the treasure within (2 Corinthians,

[1] *De virginibus*, I, 8, 51. P.L., 16, 202 D.

4, 7.) Compared with Christ, to whom the virgin is, by vocation, secured for ever, all else is 'as dung.' (Phil., 3, 8.)

Finally, this truth shows him that evil, even when it is adorned with the most dazzling beauty, even when it is attired sacrilegiously with an illusion of dignity as in pagan idolatry, still remains evil. The divine word becomes an impenetrable shield against the enemy's assaults. One word from God must, in the disciple's conscience, confute all fashionable opinions, annihilate all seductions and condemn all errors without appeal.

There are also more specific difficulties in this aspect of what we have called outward enemies of chastity. There is hand-to-hand fighting against opportunity or even direct solicitation. The life of each of us may be exposed to it, to a greater or less degree according to the pressure of environment. This difficulty must be boldly faced. Ancient Christian wisdom did not disguise that miraculous virtue was needed as a defence, especially in certain cases. St Bernard said that 'this was more than to raise the dead.' Neither relationship, nor pledged faith, nor family responsibilities, nor reputation, nor circumstances, nor different social status, nor difference of age constitute an impassable barrier. At the core of every man and woman is the beast sleeping, ready to wake at some unexpected shock, and scenting the animal reaction of another person. It is the soul, in everything, that protects the body. It is necessary to re-state that chastity is an affair of virtue, therefore an affair of liberty. Therein lies its frailty, perpetually threatened, and therein above all its value, so great that in the eyes of the Fathers of the Church it raises any man who 'by virtue lives above the flesh in the flesh' to a state above that of the angels.

Recognition of this frailty and of the threat to it ought not to make anyone timid or fearful or obsessed, but more heedful, more clear-sighted, more luminously transparent. Here, St. Paul's words are relevant: 'But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency may be of the power of God and not of us.' (2 Corinthians, 4, 7.) The requirement is, in sum, for absolute firmness in seeking nothing but God. The serpent crawls along the ground, but it cannot climb what is guarded by a perfectly smooth wall; it cannot worm its way into a pool whose perfectly clear waters expose its ultimate depths to the gaze of light. Perhaps this is why virginity has been compared to a fine ivory or a very clear mirror.

Among the dangers and threats of the world must be underlined the infection of bad example and the potence of scandal. It is strange to observe how readily he who falls excuses himself by him who has fallen before him. The story is as old as sinful humanity, since it was Adam who set the fashion: 'The woman whom thou gavest me. . . .' Eve, for her part, points to the serpent. Nothing is more discouraging than to think oneself alone in a fight or to wage a fruitless combat. Another's fault is never an excuse, never lessens our own responsibility. Far from being a legitimate pretext, desertion on the part of one is a reason for greater valiance on the part of his brothers-in-arms. The sickness of one member requires more vigorous health in the others. Before God, a brother's fault prompts a more generous will towards fidelity, and a compensation.

Finally, it cannot be stated too often that Christian virginity is not to be compared with pagan marriage, but to marriage become a sacrament in Christ. On some days, above all in some depressed hours, hours of

ageing and also of defeat, when life seems fruitless and empty, the Christian committed to celibacy is tempted, perhaps, to regret the human-divine fulfilment that he has renounced for the 'Kingdom of Heaven'. He feels it all the more if he happens to contemplate with legitimate admiration one of those magnificent and all too rare successful marriages that are truly Christian. Then, he must understand that the Mystical Body needs both states for its fulfilment, and that perhaps his life, unfulfilled from a human point of view, will serve the ends of this success in the mystery of the communion of saints. In any case, even in view of our Lady's motherhood, the only happiness that counts is to hear the word of God and to keep it.

A Christian virgin, growing old and flouted, when she suffers from loneliness and misunderstanding, must remember, if she is faithful, that according to St Ambrose's beautiful expression, 'In her, the Son of Man has found where to lay his head.' No human happening, however delusive, can change the reality of the divine espousal. St John Chrysostom says it forcefully: 'On earth a girl who receives a king for her husband thinks herself the happiest of all. Thou hast no husband, nor a companion to serve thee, but him who is in heaven, who is above all principality, above all power, who possesses all virtue and everything which bears a name, who sits upon the Cherubim, who makes the earth tremble and stretches the heavens, who is terrible to the Cherubim and inaccessible to the Seraphim; he is husband to thee, but much more a lover, a lover more ardent than any human being; wouldest thou not abandon for him all that is here below, even life itself?'[1]

[1] *Against cohabitation between clerics and women*, 9. P.G., 47, 532.

Her disappointment when she feels persistently how mediocre she is, is no reason for discouragement. Rather is it an invitation to hasten progress by putting complete trust in him who has called her to follow him, who is faithful, who needs, not a long time to act on her behalf, but only that she should make herself completely receptive to him; for he is reserving for her what St Cyprian called 'The immense reward of virginity.'[1]

[1] *De habitu virginum*, 22. P.L., 4, 461 A.

SUPERHUMAN HEIGHTS

THE greatest difficulty in the practice of chastity appears to arise not so much from the rebellious flesh or a corrupt environment as from the very loftiness of the task undertaken. The force of instinct has not only to be mastered, but made an integral part of spiritual life. Chastity, above all virginal chastity, would be far from the ideal of Christian chastity if it were conceived purely as a defensive virtue. This would indeed represent the negative attitude so decried nowadays. True chastity is victorious and positive, for she takes over the sector concerned with affection to make it serve the purpose of divine love. The water that was being wasted in barren, foul-smelling swamps is used from now on to irrigate flower-gardens and orchards, according to St Augustine's image. Chastity will be successful, or on the road to success, in so far as it gives the celibate a more intense life, more closely united to the seeking for charity. Instinct, and all affectivity depending on it to a greater or less extent, must enter into this life; otherwise it would be present as a foreign body, as a dividing principle. The old aphorism of Greek medicine applies here: 'An organism thrives only on what it overcomes.' The soul must

assimilate this force which is alien to the love that has become its life.

An obsessed chastity, always ready to take alarm, always called in question, is not Christian chastity, especially not Christian virginity. Let no one mistake my meaning. Chastity is essentially a resolution of the will, and from this fact, it is always possible through man's own effort and the gift of grace. This does not refer to pathological cases, the result of tendency, which fall outside the scope of liberty as of grace. But it is an article of faith, defined at the Council of Trent,[1] that it is never impossible to live in celibacy, at least when it is vowed and consecrated.

Certainly, between the two extremes, of virginity blossoming in liberty and unity and of a pathological impossibility for which celibacy would be physiologically unsound, if not impossible (erotomania), the whole intermediate space is a debating ground for the majority of humans, containing inextricable combinations of psycho-physiological tendencies and free will. Each case must be studied individually, and each usually remains the secret of him who alone probes loins and hearts.

Clearly, fidelity and simple reverence in prayer bring about the normal conditions for the fulfilment of this life. 'To ask for victory,' says Péguy, 'and to have no wish to fight for it, would be ill-mannered.' To remain in the fire and to ask not to be burnt is to tempt God.

It is to the point here to note the difference between the Christian and Hindu attitudes. The former sees above all a call from God and progress towards a union in which God takes all the initiative. It is a union always freely granted, for he crowns his own gifts when he

[1] Session 24, 9. Denzinger, 980.

crowns our endeavours. It depends on supernatural means, first on prayer and on spiritual demands.[1] Hindu chastity, existing in the light of pantheism, is based on meticulous technique and human effort perfected by a very methodical training.

Yet, although celibate chastity is always possible for anyone who has the vocation and has committed himself, its degrees of success vary. It is a masterpiece wrought by grace in the realization of an ideal, employing all the most generous resources of nature. Alas! Mention of a masterpiece presumes a thousand counterfeits, distortions and caricatures. I mean distortions rather than failures. 'The greatest danger in this sacrifice does not consist of the struggles it involves, but the accomplices we find in our own natures conspiring to twist it, and give it equivalents on the human level.' (Delbrel.) 'Sacrifice feeds the soul,' says G. Thibon, 'repression poisons it.' These perils threaten us the rather because we are on a spiritual level, a level where illusion may cover the grossest lies with the name of an ideal. 'He that is without a wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord: how he may please God.' (1 Corinthians, 7, 32.) How often does it happen that celebates still busy themselves with their own affairs, and are pre-occupied with themselves! Virginity makes no sense except in the light of a higher love of God, of more complete gift to him. Its being should normally comprise every affective resource of human

[1] Insistence on the supernatural character does not imply negation of the natural basis on which the building is founded. One feels all the more the poverty of language which does not sufficiently emphasize the unity of a human being. 'The supernatural itself is carnal.' (Péguy.) The whole human being must go to God and such a complete vocation must not forget to take the temperamental conformation.

nature, to be 'purchased from among men, the first-fruits to God and the Lamb.' Alas![1]

Virginity must never be considered as finished; it is a path, and a path is made to walk along without straying. Spiritual writers from the time of the Desert Fathers did not wait for Nietzche's criticism and Freud's theories to denounce the dangers that beset a stream when it becomes stagnant. Yet, some modern expressions throw felicitous light on the subject. Disordered feeling, transposition and disintegration occur whenever a lower impulse fills disproportionate space, or whenever it becomes attached to a seeming ideal without being purified and inwardly transformed, whatever fine name the ideal goes under. In such cases, instinct, especially the sexual instinct which chiefly concerns us, maintains its own life under the cloak of fine but usurped names. Repression occurs when instinct, deflected from its proper channel or from its proper activities, takes on a colouring of aggressiveness and creeps along another course in the guise of scrupulosity, obsession, or other impulses of the kind.

True sublimation occurs when these powerful instincts are deeply penetrated by the spirit and are taken without corruption or falsehood to serve the ends of the true ideal, becoming part of its profound depth and of its transcendent height. G. Thibon makes a happy comparison of water which enters into the composition of wine naturally through being transformed by the

[1] These ideas might be compared with the conclusions of Christian doctors, who see in the attitude of acceptance and offering, 'oblativity' (Dr Pichon's term borrowed from him by Dr S. Roussel), the best way of avoiding the psychological damage of confused, perverted or repressed emotion; a "captative" attitude (propensity to turn everything inward on to a central self) is the ideal breeding ground for such states of mind.

vine and its work of nature, and of water artificially added to wine, spoiling it.

On the basis of these psychological truths, I should like to point out some of the ways in which the authentic upward progress can go astray, always remembering that these strayings are possible only when people stop aiming at the goal. Also, they are by no means the dreary monopoly of celibacy.

The first deviation occurs under the general heading of pious sentimentality. A person loves God or what he or she calls God, with an unpurified affectivity, sometimes even steeped in sensuality. To love God is to depart an infinite distance from oneself since no being is as far from us as he is, although he is also the nearest. It is at the same time to rise root and branch above the plane of sense, for he is Spirit and Truth. The sophisticated love mentioned above finds satisfaction in itself, stops at the emotions and more or less consciously seeks them. It does not emerge from itself, but wanders in a maze of petty circumstances of its own states of soul and its own impressions.

Perhaps such a person speaks of nothing but God, of piety, of charitable works; but it all remains far too much on the level of emotionalism, which neither is nor can be the level of the Kingdom of God. The way in which this sentimentality has crept into our religious vocabulary, especially in hymns and works of piety, has been almost too much the subject of comment. It is something that shocks people who see it from outside. The language of some saints, even, has been spoiled by it; and although one guesses that the formulae are merely borrowed, ready-made phrases, it is impossible not to regret their use. This has nothing to do with sanctity, for however cursorily one looks at them, one

discovers the soul filled with the Holy Spirit through the impoverished words. Those, however, especially women, who take up these formulae for the expression of their insufficient or turbid love show themselves mincing, childish, affected and unstable. How could such ways of speaking and reacting 'proclaim the exploits of God who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (I Peter, 9) since they are of the night and of the dusk?

Another deviation, found above all among people whose celibacy is not, or has ceased to be, a gift but a burden or a regret—is an egotistical turning inwards to self. This egoism may, consciously or not, embrace in its narrow and straitening scope a few affections, animals perhaps, or some manias glorified often by great names. In all, the world is felt to be one of an ego centred on itself, regarding everything in its bearings to itself, making everything petty. This state appears in an infinite number of forms and stages, from the friendship not sufficiently receptive to God, which is merely an imperfection, to the egocentricity which is either a mental illness or a sin. If celibacy were to be blamed for any of these, it would be necessary to find them only outside wedlock. . . .

Some people, on the other hand, in order to avoid embarrassments, or even, perhaps, through a natural bent of their disposition, make it a rule to abolish their sensibility, to empty themselves of all affectivity. This is at its worst in hard hearts that have no touch of the feminine, but experienced psychologists find a similar tendency in people who have become ascetics through their professions, scholars, for instance, or activists. The almost impersonal mask that covers the face of this sort of person disguises ill the bitterness of a

soul that has neither been able to love nor to give itself.

To this type belong all those who are still, in a way that they more or less admit, interested in and attached to what they have professed to give up. Obsessed with their own fears or desires, they are censorious, with an eye for scandals. With these people, 'the mania for being judges is fed by rancour because they have not been accomplices' (G. Thibon). They are moralists whose morality has only one chapter, or 'old men who give good advice because they can no longer give bad examples' (La Rochefoucauld)! True chastity is not content to keep the body pure; it frees the heart and makes the mind disinterested.

The list of deformations could be indefinitely lengthened, and their character described. Above them towers authentic virginity. It would be easy to bring out the difference by relating it to altitude or level. If the centre of the inward synthesis is low or only slightly raised, too near the flesh, there will be thickness, confused patches, attempts at compensation, like a fog that sticks to the ground. The dominant note of virginity is the burning sense of God. It runs no risk of confounding this with anything created, since it sacrifices to it what is greatest in the world. It feels the absoluteness of God and can confront him because of the absoluteness of its gift. It understands very well that all the resources of the heart, all that has been so jealously preserved, enters into the upsoaring of love, but knows that this pure sensibility, however detached and transparent, is never the essence of the mystery of supernatural love. It is safeguarded against seeking equivalents or compensations from creatures, since it does not seek them even from God. It expects from

him only himself, it thinks of nothing but giving itself to him. What is most striking about it is its loftiness allied to inward integrity, as well as its peacefulness, because all its heart's tenderness, all resources and energies are in good order. It is like a return to the original condition of man when sensibility was fully subject to the soul because the soul itself clung entirely to God. A better description still, framed by St Cyprian, is the anticipation of the life to come. 'What we shall become, you have already begun to be! You possess already in this world the glory of the resurrection; you travel through time without suffering the pollutions of time.'[1] This indeed characterizes virginity when it is completely successful, since on the one hand it draws near to the highest peaks of Divine Love, and on the other hand, its most unruly instincts are won over, spiritualized and integrated from above in the harmony of a synthesis. It is easy to know that we are in the presence of a genuine sublimation rather than some prepossessing counterfeit. Not only does the flesh seem to share in the qualities of the spirit, but through grace, the soul shares in the qualities of God. The union of contraries, the paradoxical harmony between antagonistic elements show us that we are not in the presence of some human conversion which applies the same natural energy to different objects in turn, but of a divine conversion which endows an energy re-created from above with contradictory qualities such as uncompromising detachment together with tenderness of heart, or distance from any creature together with an unlimited power of welcome and candour, a horror of sin together with an all-embracing pity for sinners, absolute purity together with a penetrating sense of the facts of the flesh and the realities of the heart.

[1] *De habitu virginum*, 22. P.L., 4, 462.

The love of God becoming love of one's neighbour, a sense of the Cross so intense that it crucifies the body and bares the heart, these are the signs, vouched for by God, that we are truly on the Peak where he lives and speaks to his intimates 'as a man is wont to speak to his friend.' (Exodus, 33, 11.)

The road leading to this is that of truly loving. The purpose of the ensuing chapters will be to expound the conditions necessary for its fulfilment, namely the gift of a vocation, sincerity of conscience, spiritual fervour, balanced way of life, the beauty of devoted friendships, and lastly, the sense of the Eucharist shared with our Lady.

Above all it cannot be said too often that virginity has this beauty and this fullness because it is a personal relationship with God himself; because it is surrendered to a living being, immense and close, immense to enlarge it and close to fulfil it. I must allow St Ambrose to conclude these thoughts:

> 'We possess all,' he says, 'in Christ. No matter what soul comes to him, whether sick through mortal sin, or pinned down by some earthly desire, or still imperfect but nevertheless making progress through intent meditation, or even, if there is a soul already perfect by the number of its virtues. All is in the power of the Lord and Christ is all in all for us. If thou desirest healing from some wound, he is a doctor; if thou art burning with fever, he is a fountain; if thou hast need of help, he is strength; if thou fearest death, he is life; if thou desirest heaven, he is the way; if thou fleest darkness, he is light; if thou seekest nourishment, he is food.'

Indeed, let it never be forgotten. The celibate, the bachelor, lives regretfully alone, and seeks to make up for his solitude by the things below; but the virgin is 'married to God.' (St Ambrose.)

PART III

CONDITIONS FOR FULFILMENT

THE GIFT OF A VOCATION

'THE beginning is more than half of the whole.' This ancient maxim of Greek wisdom comes into its own in the study now under consideration. The spiritual aspiration is dominated by the initial purpose, on which its strength and its direction depend. The essential part of virginity is the resolution to renounce sensual pleasures, the joys of love and of the family for the love of Christ, and therefore this sovereign importance is grasped from the very beginning. The spiritual undertaking will never become petty if the kingdom of Heaven is steadily kept in sight, with its total demands and its promises that are even more total.

How many times, on the contrary, do we see bitter states of egoism that we must deplore, repressions that we must denounce, all caused by a more or less unadmitted regret! Aberrations occur when the soul is not unified in its endeavour. 'A double-minded man is inconstant in all his ways.' (St James, 1, 9.) Lack of generosity arises from forgetfulness of the vast horizon, and often all comes from a bad start. St Bernard's recommendation is to the point, 'What thou beginnest, begin perfectly.' Père Lacordaire made a parallel remark about the priesthood which applies to all consecrated vocations. 'What makes priests bad or mediocre is to have entered the priesthood with any idea other than that of sacrifice of self to the mystery of the Redemption. All else can be made good or perfected, save only this original (initial) sin.' It was of course

such false starts that the Master wished to eliminate when he made his call so inflexible. 'No man putting his hand to the plough and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God.' (St Luke, 9, 62.)

Why did he speak thus? When we insist on the starting-point as if it rested with ourselves, do we not forget that we are speaking of a gift from God? It is quite clear that the higher a gift is, the more it comes from God, for 'Every best gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no change nor shadow of alteration.' (St James, 1, 17.) Our Lord particularly said that 'All men take not this word, but those to whom it is given.' (St Matthew, 19, 11.) The initiative, then, surely comes from God. Always it is Christ who calls to him 'whom he would himself.' (St Mark, 3, 13.) More often than one would think, there is a secret call that leaves no doubt of its aim, but it generally takes the form of a gradual process of awareness to which all outward influences contribute in the form of discoveries that reveal to the soul that, in its case, the path of perfect charity is belonging entirely to Christ. In both cases, it is the Lord who chooses his spouse. . . .[1]

[1] In speaking of a vocation, there must be clear understanding. In a precise sense, the superiors are the judges of vocation. It is for them to decide or refuse to receive a postulant to a religious community. In another sense, the vocation is the leaning of the soul, a certainty of conscience that inclines its owner towards this form of life or may even present it as a duty.

This certainty of conscience is the discovery of our spiritual personality and an inward knowledge that this life is the one which will lead us to love God most. It can be received almost suddenly, in the form of a firm call from Christ, or by a very bright light ; it is no less genuine when it comes in the form of a slow ripening through experience or meditation, when it is won, as it were, by groping after hesitations and darkness. All that matters is to be faithful to all the light one has received and to walk step by step with grace, neither running ahead of it nor being outstripped by it.

It is left for man to receive this gift, to assimilate it, so to speak, for God desires the fidelity of those he has chosen, their co-operation, and here, their free acquiescence.

It is as clear as daylight if we meditate the most beautiful and the most important of all vocations. The angel explains to Mary the plan of God's Love for her, and her peerless destiny. She considers and enquires. She gives her answer after having asked the angel to explain, 'How shall this be done?'

This first reflexion or consideration has a serious meaning for the virginal vocation. Far from showing a lack of trust, Mary's attitude is the first form of her fidelity. She gives an attention which would not accept God's call lightly. 'Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, neither had the word of the Lord been revealed to him. . . . Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.' (I Kings 3, 7 and 10.) The Lord Jesus is even more explicit in requiring this attentive reflectiveness. 'For which of you, having a mind to build a tower, doth not first sit down and reckon the charges that are necessary, whether he have wherewithal to finish it? Lest after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that see it begin to mock him saying: This man began to build and was not able to finish?' (Luke, 14, 28.) This reflectiveness bears also on the ideal of the vocation, on its goods, its responsibilities, its direction and its mission. It must, step by step, cut out inadequate motives that might have slipped in and would, if allowed to remain, constitute an alloy in the metal, a straw in the steel, a pilfering in the offering. Reflection wills that the decision be taken solely for the Kingdom of Heaven; and that the sole care henceforth will be to please the Lord. Thus unified, the soul will set all its energies to fulfil the intention.

Reflexion before God means conversation with him; it means beseeching his help. It would be difficult to find a better guide to express this prayer than Père de Foucauld's meditation on Christ's call to St Peter on the waves: 'O thou of little faith, why didst thou doubt?' (St Matthew, 14, 31.)

'How great is the faith our Lord asks of us, and with justice . . . what faith do we not owe him? After our Lord's word, "Come", Peter must have feared no more and have walked confidently on the waters . . . so, when Jesus has certainly called us to a state, given us a vocation, we must fear nothing, but tackle the most insurmountable obstacles without hesitation. Jesus says "Come", and we have grace to walk upon the waves. It seems impossible to us, but Jesus is Lord of the impossible. . . . Three things then are necessary: first, to do as Peter did, entreat our Lord to call us to him very distinctly, then, after having heard the "Come" without which we have no right to throw ourselves on the water (it would be presumption, imprudence, to risk one's life seriously, it would be sin, consequently, and often serious sin, for it is even more criminal to risk the life of the soul than to hazard the life of the body), after having heard him distinctly (until then, our duty is to pray and wait), to cast oneself on the waters without hesitation, as St Peter did. Lastly, trusting in the "come" issuing from the mouth of God, we must walk on the waters to the very end, without the shadow of anxiety, sure that if we march in faith and fidelity, all will be easy for us in the path where Jesus has called us and this by virtue of the word "come". Let us then walk in the path where he calls us, with entire faith, for the heavens and the earth shall pass away, but his word shall not pass.'[1]

The soul that has answered 'yes', a 'yes' weighty with all its reflexion and all its generosity, weightier still with the grace of God, that has launched out towards him, can be described by the wonderful words of the prophet. 'Thou shalt no more be called Forsaken, and

[1] Père de Foucauld, *Ecrits spirituels*, pp. 39–40.

thy land shall no more be called Desolate: but thou shalt be called My-pleasure-in-her, and thy land Inhabited. Because the Lord hath been well-pleased with thee: and thy land shall be inhabited. For the young man shall dwell with the virgin; and thy children shall dwell in thee: And the bridegroom shall rejoice over the bride: and thy God shall rejoice over thee.' (Isaias, 62, 4, 5.)

CHAPTER I

FULL AWARENESS

IN order to attain the balance of the heights and bring about this sturdy, given and fully developed virginity, much light and truth are necessary, of the kind that become life itself. Without them, the whole 'masterpiece' risks being spoiled, and will certainly be less perfectly done. Whoever planned to build a house without first studying the lie of the ground, the quality of the materials, and without taking stock of his resources and limitations? Otherwise, he would deserve the public mockery described by the Gospel. Such an absurdity would not happen in the material sphere; would to God that people would use the same intelligence, the same simple commonsense in the sphere of the soul! What would a chastity be that was ignorant of its own nature, of what is asked of it, and of what it is promised? Would it be a virtue? Would it, indeed, be possible ?

This light is necessary first of all to illumine the choice, to allow a person committing himself to have full knowledge of the case. Modesty that thinks it should be ignorance is no part of truth. 'Why be ashamed of naming what God was not ashamed to create?' (Clement of Alexandria.) Avoid pointless inquisitiveness, by all means, but above all avoid incompetence and ignorance of things it is lawful to know, if only in order to be able to give on a regal scale. A sound and informed foundation avoids being

taken unawares, useless suffering, anxieties and scruples. It disperses illusions, and the halo of mystery that is always made use of by the tempter, and keeps the facts of the flesh clear in their greatness and their limitations.

Also, it shows the road to be followed, with forewarning of possible surprise attacks, sudden awakenings of instinct, bursts of affectivity; it guards against the panic of surprise, and teaches to deal uncompromisingly, but without emotion, with difficulties that arise from our human condition. The clear gaze will take stock of the person's own temperament and individual tendencies, without, however, forgetting what they are, or could be, for others. He will know the strength of instinct, possible perversions, variations due to age and sex, the havoc it can work, and the dangers of seduction. He will remember to take seriously his own weakness and that of others.

All this should be distinct, bringing prudence while doing away with timidity, bringing clear-sightedness rather than inquisitiveness, humility without pusillanimity, making a person upright and true in God's sight.

This enlightened consciousness is necessary for the judging truthfully of one's own case. It is indispensable to be able to make a sharp distinction between what is willed and what is involuntary and purely physical. The ideal is of course to achieve perfect mastery of the heart, imagination and senses; but this is a height reached only after much effort. The period of delay is helped by knowing that struggle is not defeat and that sensation is not consent.

This is the proper place for the understanding of man's nature. He contains two zones, one of liberty, where he is fully master because in normal cases

everything there depends on himself; in the inner world these things are the will, resolutions and assents, in the outer they are bodily movements such as gestures and words; these are all controlled by ourselves. The second zone, on the other hand, contains tendencies independent of us such as organic or cosmic conditions; these are such things as heart-beats, heredity, the influence of illness, the kind of temperament, in a word whatever depends on biological or physical laws. In man, who is not pure spirit, but who is a living part of the material universe on one large side, the domination of these forces goes very deep, all the more because no human faculty in this life can be exercised without the co-operation of the corporal organs, the brain at the very least. Thus, madness is possible, depriving man of the use of his reason, as current language so profoundly expresses it. In this case, the world of tendency reduces the world of liberty to nothing, and there can also occur crises or violent passions such as passing fits of madness.

When we come to faculties that belong to sense by their nature and purpose, such as imagination and sensibility, this influence of the inevitable is natural, for these faculties do not depend only on exterior objects but also on the physiological state of the nervous cells, and are thus bound up with the whole cosmos. It is possible not to look, but it is impossible to avoid a certain sensation being awakened by a certain image at a particular moment. In the same measure as these movements of sensibility depend directly from the nerves, the organs and their present state, in the same measure do they elude the decisions of the will. Aristotle, followed by St Thomas, expounds this by a happy comparison. Liberty has a despotic

power over itself, over spiritual faculties and bodily members, as a master has over a slave with no rights and no means of resistance, and who is as dependent as a tool. Over the faculties of sense, on the other hand, liberty has only a royal authority; the citizen has rights and obeys only within the limits prescribed by the city laws. Through everything corporal they possess, the faculties have something that belongs to them, and from this, they cannot depend entirely on free will.[1]

To make progress in the right direction, man must extend and perfect his empire over his whole being, so as to use its resources for the ends he wishes. In the artistic order, for example, there will be exercises in voice training or for making the fingers supple; gymnastics will train sportsmen; apprenticeship will make the trade a part of the body, and so on. Virtue consists in transmitting the life of the soul, or better, the life of grace to the whole domain of emotion. The resolution, which is the essential part, may be an affair of the will, but its application will often be a work of art using, if not actual methods, at least a wisdom which has been created chiefly by clarity of consciousness.

Full comprehension is not possible without remembering that emotion itself, when it is normal, contains a zone that neighbours the spirit, sharing its life. We cannot believe, for instance, that man's sensibility is purely animal when it responds so deeply to moral and artistic beauty. The same could be said of affectivity, never purely biological but steeped to a greater or lesser extent in the spirit. Normally, it is this subsidiary region that is the first to receive the Gospel of

[1] St Thomas, Ia-IIae, 17, 7, 8 and 9.

Divine Love because its perceives its beauty. It subsequently spreads the gospel gradually throughout the sensibility, and from it ensues the importance of whatever develops wholesome, beautiful and lofty feelings, such as good examples, reading, and personal meditations. Who admitted feeling huge regions in his heart where the Gospel had not yet been hinted? The endeavour of making the life of Christ permeate all these regions is the deepest interpretation of Christian asceticism; it is a work of transforming inwardly, of attentiveness, of throwing oneself open to the light, of calmness, above all of love, for anyone who loves does so, desires to do so, with all his being. 'The fire never saith; It is enough.' (Proverbs, 30, 16.) By its very nature fire cannot stop, it must gain more and more ground.

Alas! this work is to be feared if it works in an opposite direction. Sensuality can invade everywhere under a variety of forms, can seep into the zone of spirituality, distil its poison, and cause a final capitulation of the will.

'Let no man when he is tempted,' said St James, 'say that he is tempted by God. For God is not a tempter of evils: and he tempteth no man. But every man is tempted by his own concupiscence, being drawn away and allured. Then, when concupiscence hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin. But sin, when it is completed, begetteth death.' (St James, 1, 13 ff.)

Full awareness, therefore, is necessary because it will not play with fire. It will let God's light penetrate into the most secret hiding-places of the heart. To be tempted, to feel the promptings of desire, is usually nothing if only it is surveyed clear-sightedly and recognized as an evil. The danger is if it is dissembled

under the name of a good, or if its importance is underestimated. The enemy is compared by the Desert Fathers to one of those beasts or reptiles who are afraid of the light and cannot bear it; it is often enough to put him to flight if he is confronted and, better still, frankly admitted. If this candour is lacking and a person conceals his own condition from himself, what was perhaps only a natural instinct can become poisonous and deadly. Above all, it can be turned into a sin, a source of death, if it is accepted, entertained and savoured for its deceptive pleasure. The awareness that guards against this is far removed from scruples and complicated analyses, for 'he that doth truth cometh to the light, that his works may be made manifest: because they are done in God.' (St John, 3, 21.)

A clear awareness does not become discouraged after a failure, because it sees in the difficulty increased by the fault an occasion for expiation and making amends. Never will it call in question the sacred engagement it has undertaken. To this luminous centre, to this lighthouse must we return, for this clarity is the print of the divine countenance on us. The consciousness of a life entirely given is the seal set on the heart by God's own jealousy. 'For I am jealous of you with the jealousy of God himself. For I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.' (2 Corinthians, 11, 2.)

CHAPTER XI

SPIRITUAL INTENSITY

TO stress the resolution aware of itself as the essential part of virginity is to make it understood that virginity cannot be lived without an intense spiritual life, 'in sight of the Kingdom of Heaven!' The gift made at this height is fulfilled from this point of view and at this altitude. Below it, all significance is lost. Without this, virginity would be neither beautiful nor possible. It would no longer have its beauty which is derived from adhering to God with complete integrity, receiving the radiation of his spirit without dispersing it, concentrating on pleasing him and being solicitous for his interests only. Without it virginity would not even be feasible; it is like those high mountain plants which die in the valley. Virginity is one of the counsels of the Gospel. Its whole bearing is to be a short-cut to perfection, as St Francis de Sales' profound observation shows: 'It is needful only to hold firm to the aim of the perfection of holy Love for the love to be perfect; love that seeks less than perfection can only be imperfect.' This is true, especially of a life whose condition of renunciation has no other meaning than to be a sacrifice to God. Compensations are sought at a lower level, where also repressions appear and rancours, egoisms and the mediocrity of old bachelors and spinsters. An aeroplane is near crashing on the

ground when it loses its speed.[1] On the level of nature and of psychology no less than on that of grace and virtue, all lies in 'oblativity'.

Intensity of faith comes first. To speak of an intense spiritual life is to assert the need for faith. 'The just man liveth by faith,' (Romans, 1, 17) for faith 'is the substance of things to be hoped for' (Hebrews, 11, 1). 'All that is needed for living in constant devotion,' says St Francis de Sales, 'is to lay strong and excellent maxims as foundations in the mind.' Some aspects of the virginal vocation bring out the need for an intense faith, of a theological faith that constitutes the light of virginal fidelity. The wonderful words of the Old Testament fit it pleasingly, 'And I will espouse thee to me in faith.' (Osee, 2, 20).

Most clearly, the mystery of virginity is meaningless without the light of faith. It is 'the daughter of the faith' according to one of the earliest Christian texts.[2] In this light, chastity becomes a fruit of the Holy Ghost (Galatians, 5, 23), that is to say, as St Thomas remarks a fragrant fullness, a blossoming from the divine seed. The divine word is the seed that transforms to spiritual fruit the earthly sap of any soil that has received it,[3] as St Thomas said.

Virginity remains a choice as well as an endeavour; it lives, then, on vigorous thoughts, drawing inspiration from them and renewing the impelling motives.

[1] It is interesting to draw attention to the analogy between this affirmation about moral and spiritual life and Jackson's doctrine of levels of disintegration. Each lessening of superior psychic forces sets free forces on a lower level, which then make themselves felt in a more or less anarchical manner. Jackson's doctrine of the hierarchy of functions throws a light on the physiology of the nervous system and on contemporary psychiatry.

[2] Hermas' *Pastor*, quoted in the introduction.

[3] Suppl., 96, 2, 3, and 4, and Ia-IIae, 70.

Lacking this attention constantly fixed on God, it would incure the stinging reproach of the Lord made through the mouth of his prophet. 'Will a virgin forget her ornament, or a bride her stomacher? But my people hath forgotten me days without number.' (Jeremias, 2, 32.)

In feminine virginity, the abundance and vigour of faith are more evident for more special reasons. It follows from St Paul's words 'The head of the woman is the man' (1 Corinthians, 11, 3) that unless she wishes to be a truncated being, a woman without a husband on earth must have Christ as her head. How many times have the narrowness and the preoccupation with trifles found in too many old maids been denounced! The wisdom of Christ gives, in this living communion of faith, something better than the thoughts of a man to those women who are consecrated to him, namely the thoughts of God. They are thoughts that enlarge through the unfolding of God's marvellous plan for divinising his own and giving himself to them; thoughts of truth enabling vision to see things as they are, leaving detail and the relative values which are properly theirs; thoughts giving strength in the discovery of things as God sees them.

By her physical constitution, also, and by her sensitiveness, woman is subject to variability and instability. Faith endows her with the stability of being supported by him who is the Saviour and who changeth not. She is dependent on him who is peace both quieting and fulfilling.

This faith will never, even less for the consecrated than for others, become an abstract formula or an intellectual riddle. It is trustful repose in a friendship, it is the teaching of a Master, the word of her Creator

and Father, when he speaks 'to her heart.' (Hosea, 2, 14.) For this reason, Holy Scripture, above all the Gospels, must hold an unrivalled place in the life of faith, for they are the most essential and most longed-for nourishment. 'Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, and I will send forth a famine into the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst of water, but of hearing the word of the Lord.' (Amos, 8, 11.)

It is striking to notice through the whole of spiritual tradition how one after the other the Fathers of the Church have insisted on the recommendations to Christian virgins. 'Let not the word of God leave thy lips either night or day. And at all times let thy labour be to meditate the divine Scriptures. Have a psalter and learn the psalms. Let the sun see the book in thy hands at thy rising.'[1]

St Ambrose also sees the primary nourishment of the soul in the divine word. He says it over and over again; let us hear him when he compares the virgin's life to the life of bees as represented by the natural history of his period. 'The bee is fed on dew . . . and the virgin's dew is God's word because the words of God come down like dew.'[2] While St Jerome gives this counsel in a letter to Eustochium: 'When thou prayest, thou speakest to thy bridegroom; when thou readest, it is he who speaks to thee.'[3]

This is indeed the mind of the Church when she hands the breviary to sub-deacons at their vow of celibacy. The breviary is above all Holy Scripture becoming prayer.

Intensity of charity is necessary above all. It cannot

[1] St Athanasius (?), *De virginum*, 12. P.G., 28, 262 D.

[2] *De virginibus*, 8, 40. P.L., 16, 200 A.

[3] Letters, 22, 25.

be said too often that the justification for virginity, its starting-point and its absolute fulfilment are divine charity. It is all made of love and for love. There lies in the final distinction between it and the continence of certain sects that more or less execrate the flesh and marriage; or between it and Hindu continence which seeks an experience, a personal liberation in the nirvana. It is born of the knowledge that 'it would love God less if it loved another that it did not love for his sake,' without denying that some Christians can, in marriage, attain a higher charity. It gives itself but without expecting in return anything except a more whole love, more attentive and more surrendered. It aspires to make the words of the *Spiritual Canticle* its own:

In the inner cellar of my Beloved have I drunk, And, when I went forth over all this meadow,
Then knew I naught And lost the flock which I followed aforetime.

There he gave me his breast; There he taught me a science most delectable;
And I gave myself to him indeed, reserving nothing; There I promised him to be his bride.

My soul has employed itself And all my possessions in his service;
Now I guard no flock nor have I now other office, For now my exercise is in loving alone.[1]

The ascent towards the highest love is continuous, with a jealous avoidance of anything that might divide the heart, concentrating all the resources of affection on God, on ways of pleasing him and of responding to his expectation, bestowing the self upon him in an offering that keeps back nothing and wishes

[1] St John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, vv. 17, 18, 19. tr. E. Allison Peers.

nothing except to be oned to him. The ascent towards the highest love! It strips the heart of the affections by which it would naturally live, opening it without reservation to the fullness of the Spirit and to the love with which the Father loves the Son.

Christian virginity is devised for love as the lungs are devised for air. The two categories must not be confused. Affectivity, particularly affectivity steeped in sexuality, has nothing in common with the transcendent order of charity. Charity is above all in the will and, what is more, it is a direct effect in the will of the Holy Spirit that has been given us. Because of its restriction, virginity offers to God's grasp the resources of the whole being to be disposed-of. Its intention is to have no screen, no division, no evasion, no fetters. Man, more sharply divided into compartments, more intellectual in his ideas, may have a less distinct awareness and may stress rather the social reasons for celibacy. Woman, made for a unity and entirety of giving, perceives her celibacy forcibly and supremely as gift made to a person. It is the same reality for both on the level of grace, notwithstanding psychological differences.

Virginal charity in no ways resembles a dual egoism, even were the second person God, for when God enters a heart he instals himself there with all whom he loves. The loving soul does not shut. No, it opens and takes on universality by stripping itself. All is far from it as itself is distant from God, but all is near as it is near God. Its centre is not itself but God, who becomes the measure of its affections, its attachments, and its scale of values. It loses itself to find God.

While marriage gives the beings it unites or receives a sacred reason for living that is included in the order

of charity, consecrated celibacy renounces all reason for living except the 'things that belong to the Lord.' These things, in the words of the apostle, are 'the interests of Jesus Christ,' and 'the interests and the point of view of others,' which is the very definition of Christian charity.

The other virtues demand intensity also. Charity and intense charity means virtue and intense virtue. The consecration ought to modify a soul's spiritual attitude as deeply as a betrothal or a marriage transform a worldly life. The whole spiritual life with all the virtues should take on a new character of transparence towards God, a character divesting it of selfish affairs of receptiveness towards those of all others. Without ceasing to be incarnate, everything should become to a greater degree spiritualized and made universal. There are, indeed, a few Christian virtues having a special link with virginity. The first is undoubtedly humility, for it, in particular, is necessary for the preservation of chastity. This is a matter of grace, and grace is given only to the humble, like a pool that collects in the lowest part of a valley. Spiritual teachers have long observed that rebellions on the part of the flesh were often punishments for pride and presumption. 'The would-be angel becomes a beast.' Purity is a flower whose root is prayer, for 'it is self-deception to think oneself able to overcome the promptings of sensuality by one's own strength. It is for the mercy of God to put out the burning flame of nature.' (St John Chrysostom.)

Further, the virginal vocation is a gift, and it would be utterly falsified, rendered useless and corrupt if it were attributed to oneself. In the earliest years of Christianity, Clement of Alexandria gave this counsel:

'Let he who is chaste refrain from boasting about it, knowing that another than himself has granted him continence.'[1] St Bernard takes a long time to show the value of humility, and that without it virginity would be worthless. It is a choice of Christ, but a choice that far from exalting anyone, should abase him, should become an amazed gratitude. 'For who distinguisheth thee? Or what hast thou that thou hast not received?' (1 Corinthians, 4, 7.) The more you have received, the greater your indebtedness, the more should you be dependent and efface yourself. 'The greater thou art, the more humble thyself in all things: and thou shalt find grace before God: . . . For great is the power of the Lord alone, and he is honoured by the humble.' (Ecclesiasticus, 3, 20.)

It was in the same spirit that, some years later, St Ignatius desired that the initial resolution should remain a secret shared by God and the bishop. 'If he glories in it, he is lost; and if he make it known to others besides the bishop, he is corrupted.'[2]

It was to virgins that St. Augustine dedicated the following admirable passage on humility; which allows us to feel his fear lest pride feed on virginity. His words, for the combating of any such scourge, appear even more moving than usual:

Come, then, to him and learn that he is meek and humble of heart. Thou wilt not go to him who dared not raise his eyes to Heaven under the weight of his sinfulness, but to him who descended from Heaven drawn down by charity. Thou wilt not go to him who, seeking pardon for his crimes, watered with his tears his Master's feet, but thou wilt go to him who, after having granted pardon for all sins, washed the feet of his servants. I know the dignity of thy virginity,

[1] Letter to the Corinthians, 38, 2. P.G., 1, 281 B.

[2] To Polycarp, V, 2.

and I do not give thee as model the publican who humbly accuses himself of his sins; but I fear for thee the Pharisee who pridefully boasts of his deserts. I do not tell thee: be like her of whom it is said 'Many sins will be forgiven her because she has loved greatly', but I fear lest thou love little if thou judgest thou hast been forgiven few things.[1]

Lastly, it must be remembered that every gift of Christ is for the ends of the Church. Far from causing a prideful separation from others and isolation from the community, as in a privileged caste, virginity, by eliminating the narrow confines of family life, should give a deeper feeling of belonging to the Church and of service towards its brethren.

Another virtue which must shine in virginity is Christian prudence, the prudence of the spirit. It would be fruitless to have renounced the greatest goods of the flesh merely to order life on the most trifling, such as petty interests of health, the pursuit of small vanities, and so on. Prudence is the attentiveness of the soul that concentrates the limitless desires and endeavours of charity to concrete and precise realities. It is the logic of love, true wisdom even when it appears to be lunacy. It comprises a sense of responsibility, a solicitude for what is better, and constancy in its undertakings.

By the same principle, virginity should be royal, with the Christian magnanimity that does not waver when faced with great undertakings, which is not stopped by small personal considerations, or by the mounting up of trifles. It knows itself queen, and consequently, even if it applies all care, all diligence, to the work in hand, it will never confuse these with the main object of its life. It knows itself made 'to

[1] *De sancta virginitate*, P.L., 40. 417.

please the Lord.'[1] Furthermore, expecting nothing of anybody, since it has sacrificed all and reserves itself so as to give itself to the whole world, it will have in relation to every human being, the liberty and the respect called service.

Virginity, in sum, is too closely united with Christ, too near his tastes, too aware of what the service of redemption requires not to carry a profound imprint of the Cross. The union with Christ by itself, undoubtedly, is enough to enable the virgin to participate in the mortification of Jesus Christ. 'Those who are pierced by the thorns of our Lord's crown do not feel piercings of another kind.' (St Francis de Sales.) The willingness of virginity for the mystical union will set the sign of the cross on the whole life, something necessary to remember in order to understand many pages of hagiography at their just value. Asceticism and mortification are, for Christians, less a means of defending their purity than the condition of a love that wants no other case than that where it sees its Lord dwelling, 'And where was he?'

St Ambrose wrote gravely on this subject: 'A good servant thinks how to pay his master back what he has paid out for him . . . Put this sum aside and keep it by you. It will not in every case be demanded of you, but you still owe it always. He paid in blood, and it is blood that you owe.'[1]

St Gregory of Nyssa reveals himself as keenly struck by this character of austerity in the consecrated

[1] It is interesting to see how greatly virginity renders a person capable of action, although it seems at first sight to be ordained especially for union with God. This is one other token of the unified nature of charity, which is both action and contemplation. (Laws of Christian Action, La Pensée Catholique, Brussels.)

[1] *Liber de Institutione virginis. Admonitio.* XIX, 126. P.L., 16, 299 C.

life, if it is to know the sweetness of inward nourishment. He does not lose the chance of finding the right symbol; the gracious imagery of golden pomegranates decorating a high priest's vestment deserves to be quoted:

'Let thy life imitate the nature of a pomegranate, covered outside with a hard and harsh rind which is inedible, but whose inside is pleasing to the eye by the varied and regular arrangement of the seeds and more pleasing still to the taste because of its delicate odour. Thus, the austere life of the friends of wisdom has neither charm nor attraction for the senses, but it is laden with fortunate hopes of the day when the fruit will be ripe. Indeed, when the gardener of our souls opens in his own time the pomegranate of our life and brings to light the beauty of the things hidden within, then the enjoyment of the fruit will be the delight of those who share it. The divine apostle said in one place: "For the time being, all correction is painful rather than pleasant" (Heb. 12, 11). This is the same impression that the pomegranate gives at the first touch; but later, it bears a "fruit of peace". It is the sweetness of inward food.'[1]

This thought of interior perfumes brings us back to the centre of the Christian paradox that we must be wrapped in the mortification of Jesus so that his life is lit in us and penetrates the whole of our mortal bodies. This complete transformation is, in the last analysis, the whole meaning of the consecrated life. It is of little use to describe the virtues that come in its train, for all true love transforms, since it makes us live in him whom we love. It is not a rule, controlling from outside, but a peremptory need and a soaring that is centred within. It is a source of joy and of new life richer than any other, for it is more than love. It is charity and the ultimate mainspring of virginity.

[1] Life of Moses. P.G., 44, 389 B and C.

Because of this spiritual intensity, virginity should become a manifest and living expression of the joy and the new life of Easter. It should be a reflection of the light of the divine countenance, making it present to those who are still far from it. It should be a peak before which men still sunk in their darkened valleys see the divine sun shining. The beatitude of the pure in heart, who shall see God, promises an intense life, an overflowing joy by means of which virginity gives its testimony. Here on earth, to see God is nothing except to desire him with infinite desire, and to live an intense life because it is all straining towards him, possessing him already. A few doctors of the Church, for instance, St Gregory of Nyssa, have spoken of this ardent aspiration towards God and this unmoving motion that is steadfast in him. St Gregory's commentary on God's saying to Moses, 'Thou shalt not see my countenance', runs thus:

> It is in this that the true vision of God consists, in the fact that he who lifts his eyes towards him never ceases to want him. . . . Therefore what Moses desires is realized for him in the very fact that his desire rests unassuaged. It is to see God in truth to never find this desire satisfied. But we must always, turned towards him, be inflamed with the desire to see him more, because it is already possible to see. Thus, there are no bounds to the progress of rising towards God since, on one side, the beautiful has no boundaries, and on the other, the increase of the desire straining towards him cannot be checked by any satiety.[1]

Later, he explains that this journey is stability:

> It is in this, the most paradoxical of all things, that stability and mobility are the same thing. Generally, whoever.

[1] Life of Moses, P.G., 44, 404 A, B, D, and 405 C.

goes forward does not stop, and whoever stops makes no progress. Here, he goes forward from the very fact that he is fixed.[1]

Basil of Ancyra gives the Christian virgin good counsel which shall serve as conclusion:

> She must no longer allow herself to be disturbed by anger, nor by sorrow, nor by other misfortunes lest in such agitation her soul be filled with images; but, being always level in herself, steeped in divine joy, she allows herself to be troubled by no agitation; that in her heart she keep no other image than that of her bridegroom, so well that he prints there, as in a mirror, his own beauty; that the soul contain nothing except this beauty reflected there as a mirror, and that she desire no ornament except this beauty . . . that the whole space in the soul of a virgin be filled with the presence of Christ.

[1] P.G., 30, 765 C.

CHAPTER XII

THE WELL-BALANCED LIFE

IN a matter concerning the whole human being, body and soul, a false supernaturalism would be disastrous and lead to illusion. The supernatural itself is 'carnal', and it must remain so, especially when it takes the most instinctive forces into its service. Already in their period, the Desert Fathers had observed that in a realm where the spiritual and physical are so closely intermingled, bodily remedies have their importance.

The virginal vocation usually presupposes basic human qualities. St Theresa of Avila shrewdly remarked, 'The brides of Christ ought to have at least the qualities that men expect of their wives, with fervour added.'[1]

Clearly, men look at what can be seen while God looks at the heart. Still, a nervous temperament, a morbid sensibility, mediocrity as a human being, lack of judgment, all these are tokens auguring ill for an undertaking of celibacy, especially one lived in the midst of the world, lacking the environment or the support of a community. Without this natural foundation, the supernatural building will totter continually, and the soul will be a target for false mysticism, which finds its favourite soil in such temperaments. How can anyone who has no head aspire to receive a crown?

In the same way, the fulfilment of this idea requires,

[1] Opera., V, xxx, 3.

in principle, a positively well-balanced life. Undoubtedly, Providence may take this away, for a time or even for good. God may ask for heroism by placing his own people in abnormal situations, because he can and will grant supernormal graces, but human prudence will make it its business to fulfil its task in the most favourable conditions. This should be kept always in mind. It is the reason for vigilant care for the living conditions, or for what might be called physical and psychological hygiene. Too often, people forget this aspect, seeing in temperance only a virtue governing eating and drinking. They fail to understand that it should permeate human life and subdue it to its purpose in sleep, in the use of stimulants, in exercise as well as in necessary relaxations and periods of leisure. It is of course so difficult to lay down rules in a sphere that depends so minutely on individual circumstances that one even wonders whether a few suggestions would be out of place.

The first suggestion would be to refuse to accept a state of tension as normal; to do everything possible to keep the government of the soul in one's own hands so that activity is in no danger of becoming feverish; never to act for the sake of agitation.

When service of our neighbour demands excessive fatigue, there should be due proportion between the excess and its real usefulness. A generous soul will be a spendthrift of itself, thinking it has accomplished nothing unless it is at the end of its strength.

Yet without a proportionate reason, it is wrong to burn to-day the energy that is meant for to-morrow by forcing it artificially. Such a soul should consider and apply the old proverb, 'More is useless when less is enough.' (Bossuet). Enough is as good as a feast.

t is indispensable to be able to organize life so as o avoid being carried away by caprice or detail.

Since virginity is a vocation that cannot be practised except by people fully of age, it is necessary, for practical reasons, for anyone who has to live it in the family household, to achieve a certain amount of independence so that the spiritual personality can come to growth. In most cases, time for serious reading is necessary, as also for the appreciation of art and of nature, so as to avoid being cut off from the right background as well as to develop intelligence as a counterbalance to hyper-sensibility. This, of course, must be arranged according to each individual's vocation, and his profession or trade. An unmarried Christian woman should possess a certain excellence that will give her testimony more weight.

Would it be out of place to repeat in the Twentieth Century refined and practical advice given by a Fourth Century author to Christian virgins? It will in any case remind the virgin of to-day of the need for preserving her health. 'If thy body be weakened, take a little wine for the stomach's sake. And if, which God forbid, thou fallest sick, look after thyself, so as not to give men cause to say that asceticism has given thee this sickness.'[1]

Lastly and above all, the desired poise is found above. All conditions of human life constitute the path by which Providence draws its own to itself, and every day, every minute, is to be lived in an entire receptiveness towards God, offering oneself in transparence to him who sees in secret. What matters is to understand that all is grace and above all, to live as if it were, so that every speck of earth under

[1] *De virginitate*, attributed to St Athanasius, P.G., 28, 264 D.

us and every occurrence in our life is like the stone of Bethel, 'the house of God and the gate of heaven.' (Genesis, 28, 17.), an opportunity for welcoming God and coming close to him.

THE BEAUTY OF FRIENDSHIP IN DEVOTION

AFTER reading certain texts and meditating the mystery of virginity imagined as betrothal to Christ, 'the only spouse', there might be a temptation to look upon it as a final cutting-off from all human relationships, and a solitude with God alone. The wonderful words of God spoken through Hosea apply as if meant for it. 'Therefore, I will allure her, and will lead her into the wilderness; and I will speak to her heart.' (Osee, 2, 14.) We have already more than once had occasion to emphasize the mystery of charity that, by giving to God, also surrenders to men, welcoming them more by the very fact of being placed apart from them through union with God. God's purpose and his urging make use of the need for loving and giving which is inherent in man's heart, and which seems the very core of woman, destined as she is for motherhood.

Because it is the calling of a bride of Christ, 'a help like unto himself' (Genesis, 2, 18), the virginal vocation must needs consecrate its life to all that can serve redemption. There is nothing to do or think of but 'the things of the Lord'.

These things include first of all every Tom, Dick and Harry. As we have seen, the Christian virgin has towards them the formidable and exhausting duty of loving them as Christ loved them. What good would

there be in giving oneself to him, trying to be one with him unless inspired by his spirit and his purposes and ready to do his work? The virginal love for human beings is unlike any other; for it is the truest of human loves. Yet, although supernatural love makes use of all the riches of heart and of the maternal instinct, it must guard scrupulously against the temptation of loving for the sake of the lover and the lover's interest. The Holy Spirit bestows on its own 'a heart of flesh' (Ezekiel, 36, 26), but it is Infinite love that makes it beat. A Christian woman does not devote herself to her neighbour for the purpose of finding compensation for the affective needs of love or of motherhood, but solely to spread the love she has received. She has 'received so much love that it is easy to give it back to him.' (Lacordaire.)

This idea of brotherhood, or 'un iversal brotherhood' as Père de Foucauld called it, making the consecrated person the brother or sister of all men, cannot be achieved by an affective outpouring on the level of a sensibility that seeks its own gratification instead of giving itself disinterestedly and purely for the good of another. It will be attained by an ever-deepening blood brotherhood in adoption by the heavenly Father. Delbrel has the felicitous description, 'This unity does not come about by the sharing of what is accidental but by the intensification of what creates consanguinity in souls.'

The things of the Lord also include all activity inspired by charity, whether organized or not. Usually, the Lord entrusts these works to those consecrated to him. Everyone should follow the example of St Catherine of Siena of feeling the Lord by yielding to him, by taking on his shoulder, or better, on his

soul, the weight of the whole Mystical Body. If military imagery had not been so much misused in apostolic matters, it would be possible to liken consecrated people to shock troops and volunteers for dangerous missions. These works of charity must be accomplished with a total disinterestedness and a fullness of endeavour, in no quest for self-advantage, but for the advantage of Jesus Christ. Activism will consequently be avoided; as St Francis de Sales said, 'The fiend stirs up a lot of good works so that no good should be done.' This concern and this spirit apply as much to outward action as to the most private, to prayer and self-sacrifice.

Lastly, if a Christian virgin is limited by her health or family duties to 'the trivial round, the common task' in an entirely material sphere, she will remember that this subdued and earthly position is for her 'the things of the Lord'. It is urgent and important business that she must accomplish with royal love against the background of the vast horizon of the Redemption.

These considerations of the degree to which virginity must be universal might lead one to ask whether it excludes any friendship or attachment to a particular person. Instantly, one is answered by thinking again of the authority of Holy Scripture as it celebrates friendship. 'Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart; and the good counsels of a friend are sweet to the soul.' (Proverbs, 27, 9.)

> A faithful friend is a strong defence: and he that hath found him hath found a treasure.
>
> Nothing can be compared to a faithful friend: and no weight of gold and silver is able to countervail the goodness of his fidelity.

A faithful friend is the medicine of life and immortality: and they that fear the Lord shall find him.
He that feareth God shall likewise have good friendship: because according to him shall his friend be.[1]

These words from the holy books confirm by divine authority the result of wise men's meditations and the experience of generations. It seems impossible for anyone to be fully man, or for personality to quicken and blossom, without friendship. The lives of most saints strongly endorse this statement, and Jesus Christ himself willed to ratify it by the miraculous promise that he would consecrate it by his presence. 'Again I say to you that if two of you shall consent upon earth concerning anything whatsoever they shall ask, it shall be done to them by my Father who is in heaven. For where there are two or three gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' (St Matthew, 18, 19–20.)

Friendship is revealed, in the light of God, as the continuing enrichment of two souls in love with the same ideal, sharing their goods. Their spiritual treasures are not merely added together, they are multiplied. Good example is the more uplifting when watched from close range and, as it were, seen from within, while sympathy makes it more attractive. Friendship is a driving force, a journey undertaken together with a common incentive. 'To love,' said St Exupéry, 'is to look together in the same direction.' Here, the goal is God. 'The man truly loves his friend,' said St Augustine, 'who loves God in this friend, who loves him because he is in him, and in order that he should be in him.' 'Win over what souls thou canst,' he said again, 'and say to them, Let us love

[1] Ecclesiasticus, 6, 14–17.

him, for he created all things and he is not far away.'

It brings an increase of light. 'There is more light in two heads than in one', Père Lacordaire liked to say. We need the vision of two eyes, according to biologists, to have the sense of reliefs, of depth and of perspective. In the same way, it is difficult to perceive dangers, particularly in matters concerning chastity, and to have a sound view of things, undistorted by the illusion of passion or by a too subjective first impression, without the withdrawal and the objectivity found in a second self. A friend is a support when in danger of stumbling, or something to rise by when one has fallen. He revives the heart in dark hours of fatigue, and, as Ecclesiastes says, 'It is better that two should be together for they have the advantage of their society. If one fall, he shall be supported by the other. Woe to him that is alone, for when he falleth, he hath none to lift him up.' (Eccl. 4, 9–10).

'I believe in attachments between people as I believe in God's goodness,' says Père Lacordaire. 'Man disappoints and God never does, and that is the difference between them. Man does not always disappoint, and that is his resemblance to God. As he is a weak and fallible creature, his friend has the more worth because he conceives it and carries it in a more fragile vessel. He loves sincerely in a spirit prone to egoism. He loves purely in the corruptible flesh. He loves eternally in a life that has a brief day. I believe it and I know it.'

At the same time, is it possible to say that friendship presents no dangers? Might it not become, in a consecrated soul, a fly in the ointment, a taking back of what has been given? How many noble souls are there who would willingly give up the

pleasures of the senses for the higher joys of heart and mind? The weight of solitude, the need of a complement and the heart's hunger are often more difficult to bear than the demands of the body.

Too often, indeed, friendships begun in the clearest light of an ideal and with the most noble intentions have sunk to mediocrity or lower still, above all when opposite sexes are concerned. Blessed Henry Suso, whose affective nature subjected him to many difficulties, compares the damage wrought by these affections too dependent on the senses to the terrible havoc made by a late frost on trees and flowers; he states 'that God abominates an alien affection as a bird of prey hates the cage.'[1] God desires the heart to be completely free, but Blessed Henry found that his heart became filled miraculously with light from the moment when he inscribed on it the name of Jesus.

There is a problem, then. The immediate answer is that abuse of something does not condemn its usage. What ideal is found in pure realization in this deceitful world? What, again, is there that has not been abused? The evil is not that imperfect people love imperfectly, but that their friendship, in making a tie, may become an obstacle and prevent them growing in Christ. Smallness is not a defect in a child, but it is one in a dwarf. Friendship becomes imperfect and an obstacle to perfection when it is taken for the end and not simply as the means, as all created things are; when it is taken for an absolute good instead of a relative to the extent that people do not rise above it to approach God. It is good, on the other hand, if it is used as an aid to perfection. Aelred, who wrote a treatise devoted to Christian friendship, remarked,

[1] The Book of Wisdom.

'It is possible between the good, it makes progress between those who are better, and it is consummated between those who are perfect.' There is, he says, 'a degree of friendship which is near to perfection . . . it is when man, through his friend, becomes friend of the God-Man.' The austere Saint Peter Damian, expressed this perfection beautifully. 'When I look on thy face, on thee who art dear to me, I lift my gaze towards him whom, united to thee, I desire to reach.'[1]

We may seek the advice of one of the saints hardest to please. In *l'Histoire d'une âme*, St Thérèse of the Child Jesus stresses both the dangers and the benefits of friendship.

> 'How greatly I thank the Lord that he has let me find nothing but bitterness in earthly attachments! With a heart like mine, I should have been captured and had my wings cut; then how could I have flown upwards and rested? I have seen so many souls led astray by this false light. . . .'

So much for earthly friendships and attachments. Later on, however, she adds about her sister:

> 'Celine had become, especially since Christmas, the confidante of my thoughts. Jesus, wanting us to make progress side by side, made bonds between our hearts stronger than blood-ties. He caused us to become "soul-sisters".'

She came back to this theme many times.

Of the conditions in which friendship can reach the heights and remain there, the indispensable one is a foundation of God loved together. That is the essential part of charity. The unity it creates comes from the glory the Son receives from the Father and that he lets the adopted children of the same Father share. (John, 17, 22, 23). 'The glory which thou hast given

[1] *Epist.*, 2, 12. P.L., 14, 278.

me, I have given to them: that they may be one as we also are one, I in them and thou in me: that they may be made perfect in one.' Friendship between Christians should be a dual awareness of this reality, and everything follows from it. It must, for the consecrated soul, be based on the promise pledging her to respond to God's love which has become the reason for her life. 'Outside the ring of her consecration, there is for her no love.'

This friendship must be effectual and tending together towards the highest. It would be useless otherwise. It will try to fulfil the old definition of a friend. 'A conscience that speaks when our own is silent.' Before others one wears a mask, but one is oneself before a friend, not to remain oneself, but to become what God expects. A frank truthfulness that reminds of the ideal and denounces weaknesses is essential to this friendship, even if it is hard. 'Better are the wounds of a friend than the deceitful kisses of an enemy.' (Prov. 27, 6.)

Such friendship must be vigilant, also, never to become restrictive, exclusive or limiting. It becomes dangerous as soon as the heart becomes bound up in it, seeking itself. It tends, on the other hand, to be broadening in making friends with all God's friends. Such friendship causes a development in delicacy, in understanding, in devotedness, that will spread to all, and so the soul will be set in a state of constant friendship. This broadening certainly does not destroy the true affinities between souls who find themselves again in God, but one of the best indications of its single-mindedness is this openness towards other people. In fact, the saints' friendship is never a turning inwards of two, but becomes continuously more

all-embracing, the depth of intimacy remaining unimpaired either by meeting rarely or by the number of other friends.

This friendship will never become jealous or overbearing, either. It could not attach and restrict to itself the friend who belongs to God. Of him it must be jealous only with the divine jealousy. This friendship cannot think itself a right. Has it been crucified to anyone's sake (1 Corinthians, 1, 13) or is it someone's final purpose? On the contrary, its aim is to be entirely transparent, knowing itself quickly breakable but desiring to be quite clear. There is to be nothing in it clinging or clogging. Its tenderness will be all steeped in respect. 'But the friend of the bridegroom standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth with joy because of the bridegroom's voice.' (John, 3, 29.)

This friendship, in sum, must never become a monopoly, for it must never appropriate what belongs to God and the Church, nor should it become a drag through demonstrativeness affecting the senses, for these might divert it to a lower plane.

In such a light, friendship is both grace and virtue, a precious grace and a difficult virtue. It is then that the words of Holy Scripture apply, 'blessed is he that findeth a true friend.' (Ecclesiasticus, 25, 12). A beautiful friendship never runs the risk of becoming a compensation or self-seeking, rather is it communion in the presence that crown life and a joint devotedness to its ideal. Far from being a 'less', it is a 'more', made for loving God better and giving him more. And if such friendship were not confined to two or three but admitted of many who could enter into it without lessening its depth or its beauty, because God is the living good, more intimate to his own than they

are to themselves, vast and omnipresent; then the many who entered into this friendship would be recognized as disciples of Christ, 'And the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them, as thou hast also loved me,' (John, 17, 23) so that we should, in truth, become his children.

UNITED TO THE DIVINE OFFERING

THE high value and the practical importance of human friendship has caused us to spend some time on it, but it would be a misrepresentation of virginity to forget that its centre and source is in the mystery of divine friendship, the friendship of friendships where the nearest presence, the most divinizing power and the most loving tenderness are found together. To anyone meditating the nature of celibacy consecrated by Christianity, the Eucharist is bound to occur as a parallel; the one is found almost exclusively in the Church where the other is adored. Faith in the Eucharist seems indissolubly linked with the meaning of virginity. Is this by chance? Or is it not rather a sign of the inward relationship between the divine love giving and sacrificing itself, and human love as it tries to respond by immolation. It is impossible not to compare the sacrifice of bread and wine with the mysterious words of the prophet foretelling the glory and prosperity of the Messianic era: 'For what is the good thing of him and what is his beautiful thing, but the corn of the elect, and wine springing forth virgins.' (Zacharias, 9, 17.) There is no place here for a study of the whole eucharistic doctrine, but there is room for tracing the similarities between the Host and virginity.

The profound harmony between the redeeming sacrifice and virginity is hinted in the Apocalypse in

the specific mention of the Lamb to whom the virgins are offered: 'These were purchased from among men, the firstfruits to God and the Lamb.' (Apoc. 14, 4.) They are said to be ransomed as a reminder that their victory does not proceed from themselves, but that it is one of the chief works of the divine blood, remaining a free gift painfully won by him for his own.

It is also a reminder that this human offering must be branded with our heart's blood, because it entails genuine immolation. Origen, considering St Paul's appeal to 'present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God, your reasonable service,' (Romans, 12, 1) looks upon virginity as one of the ways of obeying this exhortation; reflecting on its worth as he compares it with sacrifices under the old law, he sees it as ranking immediately after the sacrifices of the apostles and martyrs, having precedence of the sacrifice of all those who live chastely.[1]

It is certain, moreover, that it was the intention of responding to the love of the Saviour that gave rise, in his Church, to the resolution of virginity, a resolution that appears to have been, for many, a desire to replace martyrdom by it at a time when martyrdom was no longer open to them because the age of persecutions had come to an end.

It must never be forgotten, finally, that no human immolation has value in God's sight; it can be fruitful only if united to Christ's offering by faith full of love. It is his offering that gives it all the worth it has; without it, there would be nothing but barren mutilation. The Christian virgin puts trust, not in her own works or her own victory, but in Christ from whom flows all good. In offering virginity to his Father, he

[1] P.G., 14, 1205 A.

:nders it pleasing by the merits of his own sacrifice, ıaking it a small 'host' absorbed into the great and nly one.

The Eucharist is also the strength and stay of the ›nsecrated life. The victory is a gift from God. It is ıpossible to approach the tabernacle sincerely withıt feeling abhorrence of impure solicitings, to the ›int of seeing them, with St Paul, as filth and of eling how far beneath Christ are even the finest ıman realities; 'all this is less than my Christ', as e eucharistic soul exclaimed.

The divine presence, apparent to the senses in the hiteness of the bread, and supersensible in its essence, for a soul emptied of all human affection, a seat of 'erwhelming attraction where it can find its God en on earth. 'Whoever succeeds in knowing and ving God has received the supreme gift. He has ›thing left to desire and nothing left for regret.' acordaire).

The Eucharist is in truth Christ granting himself his people to enable them to confront God and ›rify him; thus he becomes the living door leading :m to the Holy of Holies, passing from the Eucharist the Trinity.

BY THE LIGHT OF OUR LADY

VIRGINITY has always been imagined in close relation to our Lady, both in the Roman Catholic Church and in the churches of the East. She is the Virgin of virgins, and this is one of her titles to glory that brings out the supremacy and attraction of her virginity in comparison with all her other titles. 'Let Mary's life,' said St Ambrose, 'show you virginity as in a mirror, from which shines the beauty of chastity and the ideal of virtue.'[1] Yet, if one reads the Gospel carefully, one is struck by the degree to which Mary's virginity was hidden from men, remaining God's secret. When the angel was sent to the Virgin, she was already betrothed to Joseph; later, forty days after her miraculous childbirth, Mary went to the Temple for purification, publicly ranking herself with all other women, who bear children in pain. Is it a contradiction, or is it rather the sign of one of those miracles too beautiful to be displayed to the world's gaze? By joint agreement, God and Mary made it their secret before they made of it a guiding light for the Church.

Endeavouring to penetrate deeper into the mystery, as the greatest doctors of the Church lead us to do, we are struck by the novelty of this decision. Whence could it have come into the heart of the young Jewess? The woman of the Old Testament found her glory in motherhood. There could be no deeper grief, no keener

[1] *De virginitate*, II, 2, 6. P.L., 16, 208 C.

humiliation than barrenness. Our Lady must have heard told, and meditated with deep feeling the story of Anna, the vow she took, and the prayers that she groaned out 'of the abundance of my sorrow and grief.' (I Kings, 1, 16.)

As well as all other reasons, those of blood, or heart, and of interest, there was always the hope, for a woman of Israel, to ennoble fruitfulness, that she might become, if not the mother, at least an ancestor of the promised and expected Messiah. Our Lady renounced explicitly all that to enter into the virginal way; it is right, therefore, to see in her the first standard-bearer of virginity, drawing in her train all Christian virgins to lead them to her Son. To her Son, because, although there might be no reason apparent in her background or in her family, there was a supreme fitness in the interests of him who loved her with the love of a son from all eternity and from the moment of his conception. Dante says it in poetry when he calls her 'Daughter of her Son'. It is said of her from the remote Christian antiquity, that she gave birth to him who had created her. He, then, was the inspirer of the design of virginity, finding in her through it a heart cleaner, more belonging to love, flesh more worthy of him and a miraculous conception which made the world understand that the Heavenly Father is his sole first cause, and that he is son of him only.

Mary's virginity, determined in the light of the Holy Spirit, was what she clung to more than anything else in the world. When the angel revealed to her in such a forthright manner that she would conceive and give birth to the Messiah, to him who would wield the sceptre of David in an unending

reign, she found difficulties, or rather, one difficulty only, 'I know not man', translated with happy precision by Canon Osty as 'I keep virginity.' (Luke, 1, 34.) Thus, her virginity is revealed not only sheltered by men's promises, says Bossuet, 'but by the promises of God.' The great lesson for those who follow her is that no price is too high for this good, a gift never to be surrendered. As Solomon said, jealousy is as 'hard as hell'. (Canticle of Canticles, 8, 6.)

The gospel story, illuminated by the eternal faith of the Church, shows us our Lady afterwards sharing her resolution with her life companion. According to St Thomas Aquinas, our Lady, having first of all ardently hoped and resolved to consecrate her virginity to God, did not actually confirm it by a final vow until she was in agreement with her betrothed; therefore their joint resolution of virginity was the mutual gift of their conjugal love.[1] This is the meaning of St Ambrose's words, 'To all whom she approached, Mary gave the privilege of chastity.'[2] In the Church, it is she who, for her intimate friends, makes virgin their bodies and spirits.

The account of the Annunciation, never to be exhausted by Christian meditation, brings us to an understanding of the depths of Mary's heart, revealing the substantial quality of this gift, containing the amazement of humility, absolute trust, ardent desire and above all, complete self-abandonment to the Divine Love. 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy will.'

In our Lady's attitude of self-sacrifice virginity will find its truth, its fullness and its beauty.

[1] IIIa, 28, 4c and ad. 3.
[2] P.L., 16, 319.

APPENDIX

ENCYCLICAL LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS PIUS XII ON HOLY VIRGINITY (*Sacra Virginitas*)

Venerable Brethren, Peace and Apostolic Benediction.

INTRODUCTION

Virginity in History

Holy virginity and absolute chastity pledged to the service of God unquestionably take rank among the priceless values which the Church's Founder bequeathed to the society which He established.

This is why the Holy Fathers unhesitatingly maintained that life-long virginity is a gift from on high which was brought into the world by Christianity. They are also fully justified in drawing attention to the purely temporary character of the state of virginity imposed upon the Vestal Virgins by pagan antiquity,[1] and in pointing out that it was solely as a pre-requisite for marriage that the practice and preservation of virginity was enjoined in the Old Testament.[2] 'We read,' adds St Ambrose,[3] 'that the temple at Jerusalem also had its virgins. But what does the Apostle say? "When all this happened to them, it was a symbol,"[4] designed to indicate the shape of things to come.'

In the event, ever since the time of the Apostles this virtue has been thriving and flowering in the garden of the Church. The statement in the Acts of the Apostles[5] that the four

[1] Cfr. St Ambrose, *De virginibus*, lib. I, c. 4, n. 15; *De virginitate*, c. 3, n. 13; *P. L.* XVI, 193, 269.
[2] Cfr. *Ex.* 22, 16–17; *Deut.* 22, 23–29; *Ecclus.* 42, 9.
[3] St Ambrose, *De virginibus*, lib. I, c. 3, n. 12; *P.L.* XVI, 192.
[4] *I Cor.* 10, 11.
[5] *Acts* 21, 9.

daughters of Philip the Deacon were virgins is a reference, not so much to their youth, as to their state of life. Shortly after this, St Ignatius of Antioch[1] makes mention, in his greetings to the Christians at Smyrna, of the Virgins, who, together with the Widows, formed an important part of the community. In the second century, as St Justin informs us 'many men and women of sixty and seventy years of age have been inspired since childhood by the teaching of Christ to keep themselves intact.'[2] Little by little the number of men and women who had pledged their chastity to God increased and at the same time the function which they discharged in the Church became considerably more important, as We have set forth at greater length in Our Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi*.[3]

Moreover, in their writings the Holy Fathers—St Cyprian, St Athanasius, St Ambrose, St John Chrysostom, St Jerome, St Austin and others—extolled virginity in the highest terms. The teaching of the Holy Fathers on this subject and the development which it has received in the course of centuries at the hands of the Doctors of the Church and the masters of Christian Ascetical Theology do much to promote among Christians of both sexes the firm determination to dedicate themselves to God in perfect chastity and to persevere in their determination until death.

There is no counting the number of those who, from the foundation of the Church till our own day, have offered their chastity to God. Some there are who have always kept their virginity intact. Others have dedicated their remaining years to God after losing a husband or wife. Others, again, have embraced a life of absolute chastity on being converted from a life of sin. But they are all distinguished by their common determination to abstain, for the love of God, from the gratifications of the flesh. Let, then, the tribute of praise which the Holy Fathers have paid to the glory and the value of virginity serve to invite, to sustain and to strengthen

[1] Cfr. St Ignatius of Antioch, *Ep. ad Smyrn.*, c. 13; ed. Funk-Diekamp, *Patres Apostolici*, vol. I, p. 286.
[2] St Justin, *Apol. I pro christ.*, c. 15; *P. G.* VI, 349.
[3] Cfr. Apost. Const. *Sponsa Christi*; *A. A. S.* XLIII, 1951, pp. 5–8.

all these persons so that they may steadfastly adhere to the sacrifice they have made and not take back and claim for themselves so much as a minim of the whole-burnt offering which they have laid on the altar of God.

Perfect chastity is the subject-matter of one of the three vows which go to make up the religious state.[1] It is required too of all clerks in major orders in the Latin Church[2] and of the members of Secular Institutes[3]. But it is also bright in the lives of many ordinary layfolk. For there are men and women who are not in the public state of perfection, but who nevertheless make a resolution, or take a private vow, of complete chastity, in order to be able to serve their fellow-men with greater freedom and to unite themselves in spirit to God with greater ease and in closer intimacy.

To each and every one of these well-beloved sons and daughters of Ours who have in one way or another dedicated themselves soul and body to God We are turning our fatherly thoughts and We very strongly urge them to strengthen their holy resolve and to use all diligence in carrying it into effect.

As, however, some of our contemporaries are going astray on this subject and are exalting the married state to the point of placing it above virginity, thereby disparaging consecrated chastity and ecclesiastical celibacy, our apostolic sense of duty compels us to proclaim and defend the excellence of virginity, at the present moment in particular, with the object of shielding Catholic Truth from mistaken ideas of this kind.

[1] Cfr. *C. I. C.*, can. 487.
[2] Cfr. *C. I. C.*, can. 132 § 1.
[3] Cfr. Apost. Const. *Provida Mater*, art. III, § 2; *A. A. S.* XXXIX, 1947, p. 121.

I

THE CHURCH'S DOCTRINE

It is essentially that taught by Christ

It is, we think, important to note that the Church has received the essence of her teaching on virginity from the lips of her divine Bridegroom himself.

Their Master's declaration on the duties and burdens of the married state struck his disciples as very hard doctrine. Their comment was: 'If the case stands so between man and wife, it is better not to marry at all.'[1] Jesus Christ made the reply that this conclusion cannot be taken in by everybody, but only by those who have the gift. Some, he declared, are barred from marriage by natural defect, some by the wicked violence of man, whereas others forgo marriage on their own initiative and of their own free will, 'for love of the kingdom of heaven', and he concludes: 'Take this in, you whose hearts are large enough for it.'[2]

The divine Master's saying is not concerned with physical impediments to marriage. He is referring to a free spiritual decision to embrace life-long celibacy and continence. By comparing those who of their own accord have made up their mind to this renunciation with those who have been forced into it by nature or by human violence, what is he teaching if not that, to be really perfect, chastity must be perpetual ?

Moreover—and this is the clear teaching of the Holy Fathers and Doctors of the Church—chastity is no Christian virtue unless we embrace it 'for love of the kingdom of heaven'[3] unless, that is to say, we adopt this way of life the more easily to attend to the things of God, the more safely to achieve eternal happiness, the more freely to devote our diligent endeavours to bringing others to the kingdom of heaven.

[1] *Matth.* 19, 10. [2] Ibid. 19, 11-12. [3] Ibid. 19, 12.

The distinction attaching to Christian virginity cannot, therefore, be claimed by people whose celibacy is mere selfishness, or, as St Austin remarks,[1] a flight from matrimonial responsibilities, or a proud pharisaical show of bodily integrity. The Council of Gangra long since passed censure on the virgin or celibate who shrinks from marriage as from a thing of horror and not for the positive excellence and holiness of virginity.[2]

Teaching of St Paul and of the Fathers

Furthermore, the Apostle of the Gentiles, divinely inspired, reminds us that 'He who is unmarried is concerned with God's claim, asking how he is to please God. . . . So a woman who is free of wedlock, or a virgin, is concerned with the Lord's claim, intent on holiness, bodily and spiritual.[3] Here, then, is the main purpose and the chief meaning of Christian virginity: to strive wholly and solely for the things of God and to direct one's mind and heart to them alone; to desire to please God in all things; to meditate earnestly on him; and entirely to dedicate body and soul to him.

This is how the Holy Fathers invariably interpreted the words of Christ and the teaching of the Apostle of the Gentiles. For, from the early days of the Church, they deemed virginity to be a dedication of body and soul to God. Accordingly, St Cyprian requires of virgins 'that as they have pledged themselves to Christ, they must give up the desires of the flesh and devote themselves body and soul to God. . . , and no longer seek to adorn themselves or to gratify anyone but their Lord and Master.'[4] The Bishop of Hippo is still more explicit: 'It is not on its own account, but because it is consecrated to God, that virginity is held in honour. . . . It is not their virginity that we extol in virgins

[1] St Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, c. 22; *P. L.* XL, 407.
[2] Cfr. can. 9; Mansi, *Coll. concil.*, II, 1096.
[3] *I Cor.* 7, 32, 34.
[4] St Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, 4; *P. L.* IV, 443.

but their consecration in plighted continence to God.'[1] Basing themselves on the authority of St Austin, the chiefest doctors of Sacred Theology, St Thomas Aquinas[2] and St Bonaventure,[3] tell us that, unless it is grounded on a vow to keep it unimpaired for evermore, virginity is not the settled disposition that makes a virtue. And, to be sure, Christ's teaching on life-long celibacy finds its supreme and most perfect fulfilment in those who bind themselves to observe it by taking a perpetual vow. It cannot fairly be maintained that the resolve made by people who meant to reserve for themselves some way of retreat is more profitable and more perfect.

The bond of absolute chastity is regarded by the Holy Fathers as a kind of spiritual marriage which weds the soul to Christ. Some of them consequently even go so far as to place any violation of one's plighted troth in this matter on a par with adultery.[4] So, too, St Athanasius records that the Catholic Church is wont to call those who are esteemed for the virtue of virginity brides of Christ.[5] Writing about consecrated virgins, St Ambrose pithily states that 'A virgin is one who gives her hand in marriage to God.[6] Indeed, as the writings of the same Doctor of Milan show,[7] from as early as the fourth century, the rite for the consecration of virgins was very similar to the one still used by the Church at this day for blessing marriage.[8]

For the same reason the Holy Fathers urge virgins to love their divine Bridegroom more deeply than they would love their husbands, had they been married, and to conform

[1] St Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, cc. 8, 11; *P. L.* XL, 400, 401.
[2] St Thomas, *Summa Th.*, II-II, q. 152, a. 3, ad 4.
[3] St Bonaventure, *De perfectione evangelica*, q. 3, a. 3, sol. 5.
[4] Cfr. St Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, c. 20; *P. L.* IV, 459.
[5] Cfr. St Athanasius, *Apol. ad Constant.*, 33; *P. G.* XXV, 640.
[6] St Ambrose, *De virginibus*, lib. I, c, 8; n. 52; *P. L.* XVI, 202.
[7] Cfr. Ibid. lib. III, cc. 1-3, nn. 1-14; *De institutione virginis*, c. 17, nn. 104-114; *P. L.* XVI, 219-224, 333-6.
[8] Cfr. *Sacramentarium Leonianum*, XXX; *P. L.* LV, 129; *Pontificale Romanum*: De benedictione et consecratione virginum,

their every thought and deed to His Will.[1] Thus St Austin writes to them as follows: 'Love with all your heart him whose beauty is more than mortal. You have ample opportunity to do so. Your heart is free from the ties of marriage. . . . If you would have owed a great love to your husbands, how great indeed is the love you owe him for love of whom you have purposed to have no husbands. Let him be nailed to your whole heart who for your sake was nailed to the Cross.[2] Now these are the sentiments and resolves which the Church, for her part, asks of nuns on their dedication day, when she invites them to recite the words: 'For love of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom I have recognized, with whom I am in love, in whom I have put my faith, whom I prize most dearly, I have set at naught the kingdom of the world and all the finery of the secular life.'[3] His love, therefore, and his love alone, it is that sweetly compels a virgin to dedicate her whole body and soul to our divine Saviour. St Methodius, bishop of Olympus, accordingly represents her as using these very fine words:[4] 'To me, O Christ, thou art everything. For thee I am keeping myself pure and, shining lamp in hand, to meet thee, my betrothed, I am coming in haste.' Yes, the love of Christ it is that prompts the virgin to take refuge within the convent walls, there to stay for ever, there to contemplate and to love her heavenly Bridegroom in greater freedom and with greater ease. His love is the powerful drive that impels her to apply herself with might and main, for the rest of her days, to works of mercy on behalf of her fellow-creatures.

With regard to men who 'have kept their virginity undefiled by the touch of woman,'[5] St John the Apostle writes that 'these are the Lamb's attendants wherever he

[1] Cfr. St Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, 4 et 22; *P. L.* IV, 443–4 et 462; St Ambrose, *De virginibus*, lib. I, c. 7, n. 37; *P. L.* XVI, 199.
[2] St Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, cc. 54–5; *P. L.* XL, 428.
[3] *Pontificale Romanum:* De benedictione et consecratione virginum.
[4] St Methodius of Olympus, *Convivium decem virginum*, orat. XI, c. 2; *P. G.* XVIII, 209.
[5] *Apocal.* 14, 4.

goes.'[1] Let us, therefore, reflect upon the charge addressed to them by St Austin; 'Attend upon the Lamb, because the Lamb's flesh, too, is virgin flesh. . . . You have good cause to attend upon him wherever he goes, by virginity of mind and body. What is attendance but another name for imitation? For Christ suffered for our sake, and left you his own example, as the Apostle Peter says: 'You were to follow in his footsteps.'[2] All these disciples and brides of Christ embraced the virginal way of life in order, as St Bonaventure expresses it, 'to resemble Christ the Bridegroom, to whom virginity likens its devotees.[3] Spiritual bonds of union with Christ could not, by themselves alone, appease their burning love for him. Their love must needs be proved by imitation of his virtues. It must be confirmed by a special likeness to his life, which was wholly addressed to welldoing and was spent for the salvation of mankind. If priests and religious, and all who are in any way consecrated to the service of God, observe perfect chastity, they do so simply because their divine Master remained a virgin for the duration of his life on earth. 'This,' exclaims St Fulgentius 'is the only-begotten son of God, the only-begotten son of the Virgin, too, the one Bridegroom of all consecrated virgins, the offspring, the ornament and the reward of holy virginity, he whom holy virginity bore in its womb, he to whom holy virginity gave its hand in spiritual marriage, by whom holy virginity conceives its own unsullied steadfastness, by whose beautifying its beauty is preserved, by whom it is crowned to reign for ever in glory.'[4]

Virginity and Christian Charity

We consider, Venerable Brethren, that a further analysis and a more careful elucidation of the reason why noble-minded folk are led by the love of Christ to embrace the state of celibacy will be in keeping at this point. We also

[1] Ibid.
[2] *I Peter*, 2, 21; St Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, c. 27; *P. L.* XL, 411.
[3] St Bonaventure, *De perfectione evangelica*, q. 3, a. 3.
[4] St Fulgentius, *Epist.* 3, c. 4, n. 6; *P. L.* LXV, 326.

deem it appropriate to bring out the underlying relationship between virginity and Christian charity in its perfection. The teaching of Christ, quoted above, already suggests that life-long celibacy frees people from the heavy cares and responsibilities of the married state. The Apostle of the Gentiles, divinely inspired, tells in the following passage why celibacy is a liberation. 'And I would have you free from concern. . . . The married man is concerned with the world's claim, asking how he is to please his wife; and thus he is at issue with himself.'[1] But here it must be noted that the Apostle is not blaming husbands because they are concerned with their wives. Nor is he taking wives to task for trying to please their husbands. He is merely pointing out that their hearts are divided between love of their partner and love of God, that they are too distracted by the anxieties and obligations of the married state to be able readily to give their minds to the affairs of God. They are subject to the duty of wedlock, which clearly commands that 'the two become one flesh.[2] Man and wife are yoked to one another in all the gladdening and saddening circumstances of their lives.[3] Hence it will readily be appreciated why those who wish to give themselves to the service of God embrace the state of virginity as a state of emancipation, which enables them to serve God more completely and to devote their undivided energies to the welfare of their fellow-men. How, for example, could that wonderful missionary, St Francis Xavier, or that compassionate father of the poor, St Vincent de Paul, or that zealous educator of youth, St John Bosco, or that indefatigable 'mother of emigrants,' St Frances Xavier Cabrini, have borne such tremendous hardships and undertaken such immense labours, had they been obliged to provide for the spiritual and temporal needs of a husband or wife and children?

Celibacy and the Spiritual Life

There is a further reason why all who are set on devoting themselves entirely to God and the spiritual welfare of their

[1] *I Cor.* 7, 32—3.
[2] *Gen.* 2, 24; Cfr. *Matth.* 19, 5.
[3] Cfr. *I Cor.* 7, 39.

neighbour adopt the state of virginity. It is the reason stressed by the Holy Fathers when they dwell on the benefits available to those who observe absolute continence for the purpose of becoming better fitted for the enjoyment of the higher states of the spiritual life. Certainly, as the Fathers themselves point out quite frankly, the gratifications which are the lawful property of marriage are not to be condemned in themselves. On the contrary, chaste wedlock has been hallowed by being raised to the dignity of a special sacrament. But at the same time it has to be confessed that, owing to the misfortune of Adam's fall, the lower powers of human nature pit themselves against right reason and even at times incite a man to do wrong. As the Angelical Doctor writes, the use of marriage 'restrains the soul from thorough-going absorption in the service of God.'[1]

So that sacred ministers may achieve spiritual freedom of soul and body and avoid entanglement in earthly concerns, the Latin Church requires them to submit, of their own free will, to the obligation of perfect chastity.[2] 'Whereas this law,' as our predecessor Pius XI of undying memory asserts, 'is not so completely binding on the ministers of the Eastern Church, ecclesiastical celibacy is none the less held in honour among them and in certain cases, particularly in respect of the highest grades of the hierarchy, it is an indispensable qualification and an obligation.[3]

Another point to be borne in mind is that it is not merely because they are ministers of the word, but also because they are ministers of the altar, that clerks in holy orders are celibates. If the priests of the Old Testament observed continence during the period of their priestly duty in the Temple, so as not, like the rest of men,[4] to incur defilement, it is surely still more in keeping that the ministers of Christ who offer the sacrifice of the Eucharist every day, should be distinguished by perfect chastity. *A propos* of this perfect

[1] St Thomas, *Summa Th.*, II–II, q. 186, a. 4.
[2] Cfr. *C. I. C.*, can. 132, § 1.
[3] Cfr. Litt. Enc. *Ad catholici sacerdotii fastigium*, *A. A. S.* XXVIII, 1936, pp. 24–5.
[4] Cfr. *Lev.* 15 16–17; 22, 4; *I Sam.* 21, 5–7; cfr. Pope St Siricius, *Ep. ad Himer*, 7; *P. L.* LVI, 558–9.

priestly chastity, St Peter Damian submits, in the form of a question, the following consideration; 'If our Redeemer was so enamoured of the flower of unsullied chastity that he was not only born of a virgin womb, but also fondled by a virgin foster-father, and this, mark you, while he was still a wailing infant in arms, by whom, I should like to know, does he wish his Body to be handled, now that he is reigning in his immensity in heaven?'[1]

Superiority of Virginity

This is the chief reason why it must be maintained, in accordance with the clear teaching of the Church, that holy virginity is more excellent than matrimony. Our divine Saviour had previously spoken to his disciples in favour of its advisability as a higher way of life.[2] Then St Paul the Apostle, after stating that a man who gives his ward in marriage 'is well advised,' hastens to add 'and still better advised not to give her in marriage.'[3] When comparing marriage with virginity, the Apostle more than once discloses his own sentiments, especially when he declares that 'I wish you were all in the same state as myself. . . . To the unmarried, and to the widows, I would say that they will do well to remain in the same state as myself'.[4] The superiority of virginity to marriage which we have been asserting is, then, due, beyond doubt, to the superior purpose which it envisages[5] and to the supremely effective contribution which it brings towards complete self-dedication to God. On the other hand, the mind and heart which is involved in the ties and tasks of marriage is more or less 'at issue with itself'.[6]

The superiority of virginity stands out in still bolder relief if it is considered in terms of its manifold results, since 'the test of the tree is in its fruit.'[7] We are overwhelmed with the serenest joy when we turn our mind to the serried ranks

[1] St Peter Damian, *De coelibatu sacerdotum*, c. 3; *P.L.* CXLV,
[2] Cfr. *Matth.* 19, 10–11. [3] *I Cor.* 7, 38.
[4] Ibid. 7, 7–8; cfr. 1 and 26.
[5] Cfr. St Thomas, *Summa Th.*, II–II, q. 152, aa. 3–4.
[6] Cfr. *I Cor.* 7, 33. [7] *Matth.* 12, 33.

of virgins and apostles who, from the early days of the Church until now, have embraced a single life, the more easily to apply themselves, for the love of Christ, to the welfare of their fellow-men, thereby promoting altogether marvellous charitable and religious undertakings.

We have no wish, and it would not be right, to detract from the merits and the apostolic achievements of those who are soldiering in the ranks of Catholic Action. Their saving zeal is often capable of reaching folk who are beyond the reach of priests and religious. Nevertheless we know that it is to the latter that the major share in charitable works of this kind is to be credited. They it is who are the presiding genius over every stage and state of human life. And wherever they drop down exhausted or ailing by the way, they, so to say, transmit their sacred task by inheritance to others, for them to carry on. Thus it not infrequently happens that a baby is scarcely born before it is taken up by virginal hands and the infant thereby loses nothing that the tenderest mother-love could give. The child grows bigger and comes to the use of reason. He is thereupon handed over to them to be educated. They will instruct him in Christian doctrine. They will train his mind by an appropriate course of teaching and form his character on the right lines. People who are suffering from sickness or disease will find them at their side, constrained by the charity of Christ to try, by careful attention and appropriate treatment, to restore them to health. The orphan, the one who is poverty-stricken and distressed, the prisoner is not left a stranger to sympathy and help. In the compassionate eyes of priests and religious, he will be an ailing member of the Mystical Body of Christ. They will not forget the words uttered by our Divine Saviour himself: 'For I was hungry, and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you brought me home, naked and you clothed me, sick, and you cared for me, a prisoner, and you came to me. . . . Believe me, when you did it to one of the least of my brethren, here, you did it to me.[1]

[1] *Matth.* 25, 35–6, 40.

And for our missionaries can any praise be too great? Far from their native land, at the cost of enormous labours they are bringing the heathen multitudes to the Faith of Christ. What words can we find for the dedicated brides of Christ who are offering them an invaluable helping hand? To each and all of them we repeat, by way of unstinted tribute, the passage in our Apostolic Charge *Menti Nostrae* which reads: '. . . By this law of celibacy the priest does not lose the office of a father; rather, he enhances it immeasurably, in that he brings forth children, not for this earthly and fleeting life, but for the life of heaven which will last for ever.[1]

It is, however, not only because it enables those who embrace it to give themselves more completely and more readily to external undertakings and external activities that virginity is creative. It is also because it facilitates a fuller dedication to neighbourly love in its perfect forms of fervent supplication, and willing and cheerful acceptance of suffering, on behalf of others. It is to these aims that the servants of God and the brides of Christ—those especially who belong to enclosed orders—have dedicated their entire lives.

Virginity the Angelic Virtue

Finally, the very fact of plighting one's virginity to Christ is in itself so striking an assertion of faith in the kingdom of heaven and so powerful a proof of love for our Divine Saviour that there is no cause for wonder if it yields a rich harvest of holiness. The eminent holiness of life of the wellnigh countless number of virgins and of those who are engaged in the apostolate lends a halo of holiness to the Church. Their virginity endows them with a spiritual power capable, if need be, of carrying them through to martyrdom. This is the plain lesson of history, which proposes to our admiration so many companies of virgins, from Agnes of Rome to Maria Goretti.

It is not for nothing that virginity is called the angelical

[1] *A. A. S.* XLII, 1950, p. 663.

virtue, as St Cyprian very truly remarks in a passage addressed to virgins: 'What we are to become hereafter, you have already begun to be. While still in this world, you have already achieved the glory that goes with the resurrection of the body. You are making your way through the world without being touched by the world. So long as you remain steadfast in chaste virginity, you are on a par with the Angels of God.[1]

To the soul that is craving for a faultless life and yearning for the kingdom of heaven, virginity presents itself as 'the pearl of great cost,' for the sake of which a man 'sold all that he had and bought it.'[2] When married folk, and even such as are sunk in the dregs of vice, cast their eyes on virgins, they are frequently astonished at the radiance of their limpid purity and feel the attraction of an ideal which eclipses the pleasures of sense. What Aquinas declares when he writes: 'To virginity . . . superlative beauty is ascribed,'[3] is doubtless the reason why the pattern set by virgins exercises a universal fascination. Is it not also true to say that the perfect chastity practised by so many men and women is the clearest evidence that this triumph of the soul over bodily passion is the work of divine grace and a mark of solid virtue ?

It is particularly gratifying to dwell on another delightful outcome of virginity. Consecrated virgins present a vivid picture of the perfect virginity of Mother Church herself and bring out the holiness of their own intimate union with Christ. The words used by the bishop, when addressing supplication to God, during the rite for the consecration of virgins, are inspired by a deep sense of this truth: 'to the end that there might be more noble souls who care nothing for the connubial commerce of man and wife, yet desire what it mystically denotes, and instead of imitating what is done in marriage esteem what it represents.[4]

[1] St Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, 22; *P. L.* IV, 462; cfr. St Ambrose, *De virginibus*, lib. I, c. 8, n. 52; *P. L.* XVI, 202.
[2] *Matth.* 13, 46.
[3] St Thomas, *Summa Th.*, II–II, q. 152, a. 5.
[4] *Pontificale Romanum:* De benedictione et consecratione virginum.

To be living images of the perfect integrity which forms the bond of union between the Church and her divine Bridegroom is assuredly the supreme glory of virgins. To the Church it is a matter of the deepest conceivable joy that they give marvellous evidence of the thriving holiness and spiritual creativeness which is a mark of the society founded by Jesus Christ. St Cyprian writes excellently on this point: 'Virginity is the bloom that blossoms forth from the Church, the splendour and glory of the grace of the Spirit, blessed with a happy disposition, a flawless masterpiece of praise and worship, the image of God reflecting the holiness of the Lord, choicest firstling of the flock of Christ. Mother Church rejoices in them. They are the generous flowering of her glorious luxuriance. The more lavishly virginity adds to its own number, the greater the Mother's joy.'[1]

[1] St Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, 3; *P. L.* IV, 443.

Virginity not harmful to personality

The higher excellence of virginity and celibacy, as compared with the married state, is, as we have already noted, a doctrine taught in the first instance by our divine Saviour and the Apostle of the Gentiles. It was solemnly defined as an article of divine faith by the Holy Council of Trent.[1] It has always been taught by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. Like our predecessors before us, we ourselves have taken every possible opportunity to expound the doctrine and to give it our warm endorsement. Since, however, certain folk have recently been subjecting the traditional teaching of the Church to unfavourable criticism which carries with it the risk of harm to the faithful, our sense of duty gives us to think that it will be well to take the matter up once again in this Encyclical and to expose and censure these mistaken views, which are often camouflaged in the colours of truth.

In the first place, people who regard man's natural sex instinct as the dominant factor in his make-up, and infer from this that he can master it for a lifetime only at the imminent peril of upsetting his physical and, still more his mental equilibrium, with consequent harm to the balance of his human personality, are simply going counter to the common judgment of sane and conscientious men, for which the Church has ever entertained the greatest respect.

As St Thomas so justly and rightly states, the most deep-seated of all human instincts is the instinct of self-preservation, whereas the sex instinct lies on a more superficial level. It belongs to the controlling-power of human reason, which is the singular prerogative of our nature, to govern these fundamental impulses and to sublimate them by exercising due mastery over them.[2]

[1] Sess. XXIV, can. 10.
[2] Cfr. St Thomas, *Summa Th.*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

It is unfortunately true that, as a result of the first sin, committed by Adam, our bodily powers and passions have been upset and tend to domineer, not only over our senses, but also over our souls. They darken the mind and weaken the will. But the grace of Jesus Christ is forthcoming, principally through the sacraments, to enable us to let the Spirit be our rule of life and to make the body our slave.[1] The virtue of chastity does not mean insensibility to the promptings of the flesh. It requires us rather to make them the servants of right reason and subjects of the kingdom of grace, as we strain with all our might towards what is noblest in human and Christian life.

In order to acquire this perfect sway over our bodily passions, it is not enough to refrain from any direct violation of chastity. Willing and generous avoidance of everything that is more or less distantly opposed to the practice of this virtue is indispensable. Then the soul can completely rule the body and lead the life of the spirit in peace and freedom. Anyone, therefore, who goes by Catholic principles cannot fail to see that, so far from arresting the natural progressive development of men and women, perfect chastity furthers and ennobles it to a degree.

Marriage not indispensable

It was with regret that we recently had to pass censure on a view which goes so far as to maintain that marriage is indispensable for the due and proper expression and fulfilment of human personality.[2] It is asserted in some quarters that the grace of God given by the sacramental agency of Matrimony hallows the use of marriage in such a way as to make it a more powerful instrument of personal union with God than virginity itself, since, we are told, Christian Wedlock is a sacrament, whereas virginity is not. We must denounce this doctrine as a dangerous error. True it is that

[1] Cfr. *Gal.* 5, 25; *I Cor.* 9, 27.
[2] Cfr. Allocutio ad Moderatrices supremas Ordinum et Institutorum Religiosarum, d. 15 septembris 1952; *A. A. S.* XLIV, 1952, p. 824.

the sacrament gives husbands and wives the grace worthily to fulfil the duties of married life. True it is that it strengthens the bond of mutual love. But the sacrament was not established precisely for the purpose of making the use of marriage an instrument of its nature better calculated directly to strengthen the bond of union in charity with God Himself.[1] Why does the Apostle St Paul recognize that the parties are entitled to observe continence for a time in order to give themselves to prayer,[2] if not because continence is a release for one who wishes to devote himself to heavenly things and to raise his mind and heart to God?

Finally, it cannot be asserted, as some would have it, that the mutual assistance[3] which the parties look for in marriage is a better aid to self-satisfaction than what they call the virgin's or celibate's 'loneliness of heart.' For, despite their renunciation of this particular kind of human love, it is not true to say that those who have embraced the state of perfect chastity have thereby dwarfed and denuded their human personality. They receive from God, the giver of gifts descending from above, something in the spiritual order which utterly transcends the 'mutual assistance' rendered to each other by man and wife. As they give themselves entirely to the one who is the source of their being and who imparts to them his divine life, they are not contracted but amplified to a degree. Those wonderful words of St Paul: 'I am alive; or rather, not I; it is Christ that lives in me';[4] can anyone apply them to himself with more justice than these virgins ?

Hence the Church is very wise in taking the view that priestly celibacy is to be maintained. She knows full well that for her priests it is, and will continue to be, a source of ever closer union with God.

We also deem it expedient to refer to another mistake, the mistake made by advisers who wish to discourage

[1] Cfr. Decretum S. Officii, *De matrimonii finibus*, d. 1 aprilis 1944; *A. A. S.* XXXVI, 1944, p. 103.
[2] Cfr. *I Cor.* 7, 5.
[3] Cfr. *C. I. C.*, can. 1013 § 1.
[4] *Gal.* 2, 20.

ung men from entering seminaries and young women om entering convents, by trying to make them believe at the Church of to-day stands in greater need of the help at can be given by good practising Catholics living an dinary married life in the world than of priests and nuns ho are supposed to be withdrawn from human society by eir vows of chastity. This, Venerable Brethren, is nothing ut palpable and dangerous make-believe.

Needless to say, we do not mean to deny that the witness ome by the exemplary Christian life of Catholic husbands nd wives, wherever they may be and whatever their ircumstances, is capable of doing a great deal of good. But to make this a ground for saying that marriage is preferable to complete self-dedication to God is sheer opsy-turvydom and confusion. We do, indeed, strongly desire, Venerable Brethren, that husbands and wives and brides and bridegrooms be given a timely reminder that they are seriously bound, not only duly and diligently to rear their actual or prospective families, but also to do everything they can to help others, by bearing witness to their faith and giving good example. But we must sharply reprove anyone who tries to dissuade young people from entering seminaries or religious orders or other institutions in which vows are taken, by putting it to them that they will be doing greater spiritual good if they get married and make open and public profession of their Christian life in the capacity of mothers and fathers of families. The energies of such counsellors would assuredly be better spent if, instead of being directed towards restraining the unfortunately all too few young people of to-day who wish to give themselves to the service of God, they were devoted with all possible earnestness to urging the thousands upon thousands who are already married to lend an eager helping hand in the work of the apostolate. Here is a word to the point from St Ambrose: 'It has ever been typical of priestly grace to sow the seeds of chastity and to kindle devotion to virginity.[1]

[1] St Ambrose, *De virginitate*, c. 5, n. 26; *P. L.* XVI, 272.

There is, in our judgment, something further that needs to be stated. It is simply untrue to say that persons pledged to perfect chastity are outsiders to human society. Can it be denied that nuns who devote their lives to the service of the poor and the sick, without distinction of race or social rank or religion, are in the very closest touch with their problems and sufferings and are as tenderly concerned about them as ever their own mothers could be? Again, will it be denied that the priest inspired by the example of his divine Master is the good Shepherd to whom the sheep are known and who calls them by name?[1] Precisely on account of their perfect chastity, these priests and religious are in a position to devote themselves to all men and to love everyone with the love of Christ. Contemplatives, too, undoubtedly make a great contribution to the good estate of the Church by offering both their prayers and supplications and the sacrifice they have made of themselves to God for the welfare of the rest of men. Yes, indeed, and they are also deserving of the highest praise for devoting themselves, in view of the circumstances of the hour, to apostolic and charitable works on the lines laid down in our Apostolic Letter *Sponsa Christi*.[2] Since they are thus doubly engaged in furthering the spiritual interests of its members, they cannot be said to be strangers to human society.

[1] Cfr. *John* 10, 14; 10, 3.

[2] Cfr. *A. A. S.* XLIII, 1951; p. 20.

III

PRACTICAL COROLLARIES

Let us now come, Venerable Brethren, to the practical corollaries of the Church's teaching on the high worth of virginity.

Virginity more perfect but not necessary for perfection

It must be clearly stated at the outset that because virginity is to be deemed more perfect than wedlock we are not to conclude that it is necessary for the attainment of Christian perfection. Holiness of life can also, in fact, be achieved without consecrated chastity. This is proved by the illustrious example of the many canonized men and women who were loyal husbands and wives and excellent father and mothers of families. It is no exceptional thing to meet with married folk who are striving very earnestly after perfection.

It must also be understood that, as St Paul the Apostle instructs us, God does not impose virginity as a matter of obligation on all Christians : 'About virgins, I have no command from the Lord, but I give you my opinion.'[1] Perfect chastity, therefore, is recommended to us simply as a counsel, as a means capable of leading the ones 'to whom it is given'[2] more securely and more easily to the evangelical perfection after which they are aspiring. Hence, as St Ambrose observes, 'it is not imposed but proposed.'[3]

This being the case, perfect chastity presupposes, on the one hand, that Christians are free to offer and devote themselves to God and, on the other hand, that God is giving them grace from on high.[4] Our Divine Saviour Himself put us in mind of this when he declared that 'that conclusion

[1] *I Cor.* 7, 25. [2] *Matth.* 19, 11.
[3] St Ambrose, *De viduis*, c. 12, n. 72; *P. L.* XVI, 256; cfr. St Cyprian, *De habitu virginum*, c. 23; *P. L.* IV, 463.
[4] Cfr. *I Cor.* 7, 7.

cannot be taken in by everybody, but only by those who have the gift. . . . Take this in, you whose hearts are large enough for it.'[1] It was a keen appreciation of this saying that prompted St Jerome's insistence that each and 'everyone should consider his strength and see whether he can carry out the obligations of virginity and chastity. For, in itself, chastity is sweet and attractive to everyone. But an assessment of strength is required for him to take it who can take it. It is the voice of the Lord, as it were exhorting his soldiers and spurring them on to capture the booty of virginity. He who can take it let him take it. He who can fight let him fight, let him win, let him hold a triumph.'[2]

A Difficult Virtue

In other words, virginity is a difficult virtue. To be able to embrace it, one must not only make a firm and formal resolve completely to abstain for ever from the legitimate pleasures of marriage; it is also necessary to master and check, by unceasing vigilance and unremitting effort, the rebellious impulses of the flesh and the passions of the heart; to fly the attractions of the world and to overcome the temptations of the devil. St Chrysostom is therefore perfectly correct when he remarks that 'the root and flower of virginity is a crucified life.'[3] For as St Ambrose says, virginity is a kind of sacrifice and the virgin herself 'purity's immolation, the victim of chastity.'[4] St Methodius, Bishop of Olympus, compares virgins with martyrs,[5] and St Gregory the Great teaches that perfect chastity supplies for martyrdom: 'For although the era of persecutions is over, our peace has its martyrdom, since, despite the fact that we are not submitting our necks to the sword, we are nevertheless butchering carnal desires in our soul with the

[1] *Matth.* 19, 11, 12.
[2] St Jerome, *Comment. in Matth.*, XIX, 12; *P. L.* XXVI, 136.
[3] St John Chrysostom, *De virginitate*, 80; *P. G.* XLVIII, 592.
[4] St Ambrose, *De virginibus*, lib. I, c. 11, n. 65; *P. L.* XVI, 206.
[5] Cfr. St Methodius of Olympus, *Convivium decem virginum*, Orat, VII, c. 3; *P. G.* XVIII, 128–129.

sword of the spirit.'[1] Consecrated chastity consequently calls for strong and noble souls ready to fight their battle and win it 'for love of the kingdom of heaven.'[2]

So, then, before entering upon this very hard way, let those who know from personal experience that they are unequal to the struggle, humbly listen to St Paul's warning: 'but if they have not the gift of continence, let them marry; better to marry than to feel the heat of passion.'[3] For many, in fact, life-long continence would be too great a burden to be advisable. Let priests also whose heavy responsibility it is to advise and assist adolescents, when they declare that they feel an attraction towards the priesthood or the religious life, urge them to give the matter careful consideration, so as not to embark upon a course which there is no prospect of their steadily and successfully pursuing to the end. The priest must shrewdly assess the candidate's fitness in this respect, with the help, wherever it is expedient, of expert opinion. Then, if all things considered, a serious doubt still remains, particularly when it arises out of the candidate's past experience, let the priest use his authority to get the candidate to give up the notion of embracing the state of perfect chastity and not proceed to sacred orders or religious profession.

With God's Grace it is Feasible

Nevertheless, although consecrated chastity is a difficult virtue, its full and faithful observance is feasible for persons who, after careful deliberation, respond with a generous heart to the call of Jesus Christ and do their best to live up to their ideal. By virtue of the fact that they have adopted the state of virginity or celibacy, they will receive from God the grace required to enable them to carry out their resolve. Consequently, if perchance there be any 'who do not feel that they have the gift of chastity (notwithstanding that they have made the vow)',[4] they are not to be heard to

[1] St Gregory the Great, *Hom. in Evang.*, lib. I, hom. 3, n. 4;.. *P. L.* LXXVI, 1089.
[2] *Matth.* 19, 12.
[3] *I Cor.* 7, 9.
[4] Cfr. *Conc. Trid.*, sess. XXIV, can. 9.

plead this in evidence of their inability to fulfil their obligations in the matter. For 'God does not command the impossible, but, by virtue of his command, directs you to do what is within your power and to ask for what is beyond your power'[1] 'and helps to make it within your power.'[2] We would recall this very comforting truth to the memory of those also whose will is weakened as a result of nervous troubles and who are too readily advised by certain doctors —sometimes even by Catholic doctors—to ask for a dispensation from their vows, on the plea that they cannot observe chastity without impairing their mental balance. How much more useful and appropriate it would be to help these sufferers to fortify their will and to convince them that, even for them, chastity is a practical possibility, according to the saying of the Apostle: 'Not that God will play you false; he will not allow you to be tempted beyond your powers. With the temptation itself, he will ordain the issue of it, and enable you to hold your own.[3]

The measures recommended by our Divine Saviour himself as a help towards the effective protection of our virtue are: to be carefully and constantly on the alert to do diligently all that we can on our part and to ask God in persevering prayer for what is beyond the power of human frailty. 'Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing enough, but the flesh is weak.[4]

Watchfulness is Absolutely Necessary

This watchfulness, extending to every moment and circumstance of our lives, is indispensable to us. 'The impulse of nature and the impulses of the spirit are at war with one another.'[5] If anyone yields even a little to the allurements of the flesh, he may easily find himself falling headlong into 'the effects that proceed from corrupt nature,'

[1] Cfr. St Augustine, *De natura et gratia*, c. 43; n. 50; *P. L.* XLIV, 271.
[2] *Conc. Trid.*, sess. VI, c. 11. [3] *I Cor.* 10, 13. [4] *Matth.* 26, 41.
[5] *Gal.* 5, 17.

which are recited by the Apostle[1] and are the most shameful and the ugliest of human vices.

We must, therefore, make a special point of watching over the impulses of passion and sense and of curbing them by voluntary austerity of life and by bodily mortification, so as to bring them into subjection to right reason and the law of God: 'those who belong to Christ have crucified nature, with all its passions, all its impulses.'[2] As for himself, the Apostle of the Gentiles avows: 'I buffet my own body, and make it my slave; or I, who have preached to others, may myself be rejected as worthless.'[3] All the saints watched attentively over the impulses of sense and passion and on occasion took very severe measures to check them, in accordance with the teaching of our Lord and Master: 'But I tell you that he who casts his eyes on a woman so as to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If thy right eye is the occasion of thy falling into sin, pluck it out and cast it away from thee; better to lose one part of thy body than to have the whole cast into hell.[4] This admonition clearly reveals what our divine Saviour particularly requires of us. We must never yield, even in thought, to sin and we must energetically repel anything that could even so much as slightly tarnish this very beautiful virtue. In this matter, no care, no severity can be regarded as excessive. If bad health or other reasons do not allow a person to practise very severe bodily austerities, they never dispense him from watchfulness and interior self-control.

Victory made Easier by Flight

In this connection, note should also be taken of the teaching of the Holy Fathers[5] and Doctors[6] of the Church,

[1] Cfr. Ibid. 19–21.
[2] Ibid. 24.
[3] *I Cor.* 9, 27.
[4] *Matth.* 5, 28–29.
[5] Cfr. St Caesarius of Arles, *Sermo* 41; ed. G. Morin, Maredsous, 1937, vol. 1, p. 172.
[6] Cfr. St Thomas, *In Ep. I ad Cor.* 6 lect 3; St Francis of Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, part IV, c. 7; St Alphonsus Liguori, *La vera sposa di Gesu Cristo*, c. 1, n. 16; c. 15, n. 10.

according to which it is easier to come out victorious over the attractions of sin and the allurements of passion if, instead of directly confronting them, we seek to evade them as far as possible. The defence of chastity, according to St Jerome's dictum, is better served by flight than by open fight: 'To escape defeat I beat a retreat.'[1] The retreat in question is to be taken to mean, not only the careful avoidance of occasions of sin, but still more that, when engaged with the enemy, we lift up our minds and hearts to the things of God, fastening our eyes above all on the One to whom we have pledged our virginity. 'Gaze upon the excellence of your Lover,'[2] St Austin reminds us.

Flight and the constant maintenance of a good look-out, which are involved in the careful avoidance of all occasions of sin, have always been regarded by all the saints as the best way to win in this field. But this is apparently not the view taken by everyone to-day. In some quarters it is denied that all Christians, especially the ministers of the Sacraments, should, as heretofore, be, as they put it, 'segregated from the world.' They must, it is contended, be 'present in the world.' They must consequently 'take the risk' and put their chastity to the test, to show whether or not their powers of resistance are strong. Let the young clerics see all there is to see, so that they will become accustomed to view everything with composure and thus render themselves absolutely shock-proof. This school of thought will therefore readily allow them freely and unblushingly to contemplate whatever is presented, to go to cinematograph shows, not excluding those which are banned by the ecclesiastical censor, to look over magazines, even if they are indecent, and to read novels which are on the Index or forbidden by natural law. Their reason for allowing all this is that, in their view, the mental fare of the modern masses is made up of these shows and publications and that anyone who wants to be of any use to them must understand how they think and feel. But it is easy to see that this way of preparing the clergy and of

[1] St Jerome, *Contra Vigilant.*, 16 *P. L.* XXIII, 352.
[2] St Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, c. 54; *P. L.* XL, 428.

training them in the holiness which is in keeping with the charge entrusted to them is spurious and harmful. For 'he that loveth danger shall perish in it.'[1] St Austin's warning is pat to the purpose here: 'You must not be heard to say that your hearts are chaste if your eyes are unchaste, for an unchaste eye is the mark of an unchaste heart.[2]

Without a doubt this fatal way of acting rests on a serious confusion of thought. Yes, it is true that Christ our Lord did say of his Apostles: 'I have sent them into the world.'[3] But he had previously said this about them: 'They do not belong to the world, as I, too, do not belong to the world,'[4] and he besought his divine father in these terms: 'I am not asking that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them clear of what is evil.'[5] In order to protect her priests from the temptations which may easily beset those who are entangled in the world's affairs, the Church, which is inspired by the same principles, has laid down very wise and appropriate laws,[6] to keep their holiness of life at a safe distance from the cares and amusements of the lay state.

Training for the Priesthood

With all the more reason must clerics, who are to be trained in the life of the spirit and in priestly or religious perfection, be kept apart from the bustle and excitement of the world, before going forth to fight their battles. For many a year must they remain in the Seminary or noviciate, there to receive diligent instruction and careful training. Step by step they must judiciously take up and master the problems of our time, in accordance with the directions which we have given in our Apostolic Charge *Menti Nostrae*.[7] Would any gardener expose choice but still

[1] *Ecclus.* 3, 27. [2] St Augustine, *Epist.* 211, n. 10; *P. L.* XXXIII, 961.
[3] *John* 17, 18. [4] Ibid. 16. [5] Ibid. 15.
[6] Cfr. *C. I. C.*, can. 124–42. Cfr. St Pius X, Exhort. ad cler. cath. *Haerent animo*, *A. A. S.* XLI, 1908, pp. 565—73; Pius XI, Litt. enc. *Ad catholici sacerdotii fastigium*, *A. A. S.* XXVIII, 1936, pp. 23–30; Pius XII, Adhort. apost. *Menti Nostrae*, *A. A. S.* XLII, 1950, pp. 692–94.
[7] Cfr. *A. A. S.* XLII, 1950, pp. 690–1.

tender seedlings to inclement weather, in order to submit their hardiness to the test when they are not yet sufficiently robust? But seminarists and novices must assuredly be likened to young and tender seedlings. It is still necessary to protect them and gradually to prepare them to stand their ground and fight.

Trainers of aspirants to the priesthood or the religious life will be far more laudably and usefully employed in instilling into the adolescent mind the maxims of Christian modesty, which is so effective in keeping virginity safe and which may truly be called the wisdom of chastity. Modesty warns us of the approach of danger. It bids us take no risks. It also warns us away from occasions which the imprudent man does not avoid. It dislikes indecent and vulgar expressions and shrinks from so much as a minikin of indelicacy. It eschews questionable familiarity with persons of the opposite sex, since it counsels due reverence for the body as being a member of Christ[1] and the shrine of the Holy Spirit[2]. A person who is graced with Christian delicacy abhors the slightest sin of impurity and at once recoils from it whenever he feels drawn by its enticements.

Modesty, moreover, inspires and supplies parents and teachers with the appropriate expressions needed for instructing the conscience of the young. 'Hence,' as we remarked in a recent Address, 'modesty in this connection is not to be interpreted as another name for everlasting silence and as suggesting that moral teaching must not include even a measured and circumspect allusion to the subject.[3] To-day, however, a number of those who are concerned with education too often imagine that it is their business to acquaint innocent boys and girls with the facts of life in a way which outrages their sense of delicacy. But in this matter the nicely balanced and restrained method dictated by Christian modesty is to be employed.

This delicate reserve is nourished by the fear of God, by the filial fear which is grounded on deep humility and is

[1] Cfr. *I Cor.* 6, 15. [2] Ibid. 19.
[3] Alloc. *Magis quam mentis*, 23 Sept., 1951; *A. A. S.* XLIII, 1951, p. 736.

most careful to avoid any kind of sin, as our predecessor St Clement I states in these words: 'Let not the person who is chaste in body pride himself on the fact. For he knows that it is to someone else that he is indebted for the gift of continence.[1] Perhaps nobody has more clearly shown the importance of Christian humility as the shield of virginity than St Austin: 'Since perpetual continence and, above all, virginity is a very valuable possession of the holy ones of God, we must keep our eyes wide open to see that it is not destroyed by pride. . . . The more I appreciate how valuable it is, the more greatly afraid I become, for fear that it will be tampered with and sequestered by the thievish hands of pride. The only warden of the treasure of virginity is God himself, who gave it, and God is love.[2] The warden, then, of virginity is love, and the warden's lodge is humility.'[3]

Recourse to Prayer and the Sacraments

A further point must also be carefully borne in mind. To keep chastity in good preservation, neither watchfulness nor modesty is sufficient. Recourse must be had, in addition, to supernatural means: to prayer, to the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, and to burning devotion to the most holy Mother of God.

It must never be forgotten that perfect chastity is a gift of God from on high. *Apropos* of this, St Jerome neatly observes: 'Those who have the gift[4] are those who have asked for it, those who have wanted it, those who have laboured to obtain it. For everyone that asks, will receive; that seeks, will find; that knocks, will have the door opened to him.'[5] The virgins' constant loyalty to their divine

[1] St Clement of Rome, *Ad Corinthios*, XXXVIII, 2; ed. Funk-Diekamp, *Patres Apostolici*, vol. I, p. 148.
[2] *I John* 4, 8.
[3] St Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, cc. 33, 51; *P. L.* XL, 415, 426; cfr. cc. 31–2, 38; 412–415, 419.
[4] Cfr. *Matth.* 19, 11.
[5] Cfr. Ibid. 7, 8; St Jerome, *Comm. in Matth.* 19, 11; *P. L.* XXVI, 135.

Bridegroom depends, adds St Ambrose, on prayer.[1] And St Alphonsus de Ligouri, with the burning devotion to God for which he was so distinguished, teaches that no way of overcoming temptations against this noble virtue of chastity is at once so necessary and so safe as immediate recourse to God.[2]

Prayer, however, must be supplemented by frequent and diligent recourse to the sacrament of Penance, since this is the spiritual cure which purifies and heals us. It must likewise be supplemented by the Bread of the Eucharist, which our predecessor of undying memory, Leo XIII, pointed to as the best 'remedy against concupiscence.[3] The purer the soul and the more chaste, the more it hungers after this Bread, from which it draws strength to resist all the allurements of impurity and which is the means of closer union with its divine Bridegroom: 'He who eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, lives continually in me, and I in him.'[4]

Devotion to our Lady

There is one very celebrated means of keeping and fostering perfect and unsullied chastity, the marvellous efficacy of which has been proved by repeated experience down the centuries, and this is a solid and very lively devotion to the Virgin Mother of God. In a sense, all the other means are summed up in this devotion. Whoever is sincerely and intensely quickened by it cannot fail to be stimulated to be viligant, to have recourse to prayer, to approach the tribunal of Penance and the Holy Table. We would therefore make a fatherly appeal to all priests and religious, urging them to place themselves under the protection of the sweet Mother of God, who is the Virgin of virgins and, as St Ambrose affirms, 'the mistress of virginity.'[5] She is in a

[1] Cfr. St Ambrose, *De virginibus*, lib. III, c. 4, nn. 18–20 ; *P. L.* XVI, 225.
[2] Cfr. St Alphonsus Liguori, *Pratica di amar Gesu Cristo*, c. 17, 7–16.
[3] Leo XIII, Encyclical *Mirae caritatis*, 28 May, 1902; *A. L.* XXII, pp. 1902—3.
[4] *John* 6, 57.
[5] St Ambrose, *De institutione virginis*, c 6, n. 46; *P. L.* XVI, 320.

special way the all-powerful mother of all those who are given over and consecrated to the service of God.

St Athanasius long since observed that it was through her that virginity came into the world,[1] a truth which finds clear expression in St Austin's statement that 'the high estate of virginity began with the Mother of God.'[2] St Athanasius[3] is followed by St Ambrose in proposing the life of the Virgin Mary as a model for virgins: 'She is the one you must imitate, daughters. . . .[4] Let the life of Mary represent for you the very picture of virginity, the mirror of chastity's beauty and virtue's ideal. From it you may take illustrations of the way you are to live. Here is the masterpiece in which the lessons of holiness find expression. They show you what you ought to correct, what to copy, what to retain. . . . She is the image of virginity. For such was Mary that her life by itself alone is teaching enough for all. . . .'[5] Let Holy Mary, therefore, inspire the schooling of your lives.[6] So great was her grace that she not only enfolded virginity in the safe-keeping of her own person, but also set the seal of integrity on those she visited.'[7] How true, then, is the same St Ambrose's exclamation: 'O the riches of Mary's virginity!'[8] On account of these riches, priests and religious will find it as profitable to-day as ever, for the more faithful and perfect observance of the chastity proper to their state, to contemplate Mary's virginity.

But do not rest content, well-beloved sons and daughters, with meditating on the virtues of the Blessed Virgin Mary. You may also have recourse to her with absolute confidence, in pursuance of St Bernard's appeal: 'Let us seek for grace

[1] Cfr. St. Athanasius, *De virginitate*, ed. Th. Lefort, *Museon*, XLII, 1929, p. 247.
[2] St Augustine, *Serm.* 51, c. 16, n. 26; *P. L.* XXXVIII, 348.
[3] Cfr. St Athanasius, Ibid. p. 244.
[4] St Ambrose, *De institutione virginis*, c. 14, n. 87; *P. L.* XVI, 328.
[5] St Ambrose, *De virginibus*, lib. II, c. 2, n. 6, 15; *P. L.* XVI, 208, 210.
[6] Ibid, c. 3, n. 19; *P. L.* XVI, 211.
[7] St Ambrose, *De institut. virginis*, c. 7, n. 50; *P. L.* XVI, 319.
[8] Ibid. c. 13, n. 81; *P. L.* XVI, 339.

and let us seek it through Mary.'[1] During the current Marian Year, in particular, entrust your spiritual life and perfection to her care, imitating the example of St Jerome, who said: 'For me, virginity means dedication through Mary and through Christ.[2]

[1] St Bernard, *In nativitate B. Mariae Virginis*, Sermo de aquaeductu, n. 8; *P. L.* 183, 441–2.
[2] St Jerome, *Epist.* 22, n. 18; *P. L.* XXII, 405.

IV

CONCLUSION

Vocations to be Encouraged

Amid the grave difficulties which the Church is having to face to-day, it is, Venerable Brethren, a great comfort to your chief Shepherd to notice the high esteem and honour in which virginity is held. In our age, as in times gone by, it is thriving all over the world, despite the misguided criticisms to which We have referred, criticisms which, We are confident, are destined to be very short-lived.

We must, however, confess that the gleam of joy is somewhat dowsed by the knowledge that in many quarters there is a steady decline in the number of those who are answering the call of God and embracing the state of virginity. To the main causes of this phenomenon We have already referred. There is therefore no reason to broach the subject again. We would rather express our hope that any persons concerned with the education of the young who may have blundered in this matter will at once acknowledge and disown their mistake. We trust that they will make a point of correcting the false impression they have given and do their best to ensure that those among their charges who feel that they are called by God to the priesthood or the religious life will be helped in every possible way to achieve their high purpose. And it is to be hoped that fresh serried bands of priests and religious, equal in numbers and in moral quality to the present needs of the Church, will happily go forth as soon as possible to tend the vineyard of the Lord.

Parents must not stand in the way

Moreover, as our apostolic sense of duty demands, We earnestly appeal to fathers and mothers of families to be prepared to offer to God's service those of their children

who feel that they are called to it. If this entails some sacrifice, if they feel somewhat sad or a little bitter about it, they should earnestly reflect upon the admonition given by St Ambrose to the mothers of Milan: 'I have known very many girls who wanted to be virgins, but they were forbidden by their mothers to come forward. . . . Had your daughters desired to bestow their affections on a man, they would have been legally entitled to choose whom they pleased. So are we to say that they are entitled to take the man, but not the God, of their choice?'[1]

A vocation is a great honour

Parents should consider what a great honour it is to see their son a priest or their daughter pledging her virginity to the divine Bridegroom. As regards consecrated virgins, the same bishop of Milan uses these words: 'You have heard, O parents—a virgin is a gift from God, her parents' oblation, chastity's priesthood. A virgin is her mother's victim, by the daily sacrifice of which God's anger is appeased.'[2]

Words of encouragement to the Persecuted

And now, Venerable Brethren, before bringing this Encyclical Letter to a close, we particularly wish to turn our mind and heart to those dedicated souls in many lands who are undergoing dire and deadly persecution. Let them take as their models the holy virgins of the early Church who, to preserve their virginity, went with unflinching courage to a martyr's death.[3]

Let them remain strong and steadfast 'unto death'[4] in their sacred resolve to spend themselves for Christ. Let them bear in mind that their physical sufferings, their mental anguish and their prayers have a tremendous

[1] St Ambrose, *De virginibus*, lib. I, c. 10, n. 58; *P. L.* XVI, 205.
[2] Ibid. c. 7, n. 32; *P. L.* XVI, 198.
[3] Cfr. St Ambrose, *De virginibus*, lib. II, c. 4, n. 32; *P. L.* XVI, 215—16.
[4] *Phil.* 2, 8.

power of appeal before God for the restoration of his Kingdom in their own homelands and in the Church at large. Finally, let them count upon it as an absolute certainty that those who 'are the Lamb's attendants, wherever he goes,'[1] are destined to sing for all eternity 'a new song[2] which none else may learn to sing.

Our heart is stirred with feelings of fatherly pity for the priests and religious who are making vigorous and open profession of their faith even to the point of martyrdom. And not for them only, but for all those as well who are spending themselves entirely and being spent in the service of God, We make humble petition to him that he would hearten them, strengthen them and comfort them. We also strongly urge each and every one of you, Venerable Brethren, and your people, too, to join with Us in begging for them every heavenly comfort and gift and help.

May the Apostolic Blessing, which We most affectionately bestow in the Lord upon you, Venerable Brethren, upon the rest of the sacred ministry, upon consecrated virgins, particularly upon 'those who suffer persecution in the cause of right,'[3] and upon all the faithful of your flocks, be an earnest of these heavenly gifts and let it be a token of Our special good will.

Given at St Peter's, Rome, on the 25th day of the month of March, the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the year 1954, the sixteenth of Our Pontificate.

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[1] *Apoc.* 14, 4.
[2] Ibid. 3.
[3] *Matth.* 5, 10.